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CALIFORNIA
DREAMS

#6

The Dream Team



*Will
Jenny
fall
for
Jake?*

THRIFTBOOKS

by Chelsea Brooks

The *D*ream *T*eam

by Chelsea Brooks

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To California Dreams fans everywhere

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Summary: The members of the California Dreams rock band decide to compete in a triathlon, but when Jeany and Tiffani learn that only the boys will compete, they form an all-girls team in a bid for equality.

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Chapter 1

Jenny Garrison lowered her sunglasses over her eyes and swung her stool around so that she could lean against the counter. It wasn't all that bright inside Sharkey's, the coolest burger joint on the beach. But Jenny needed the shades for spying. She didn't want her brother Matt to see her eyeballing his table. And she definitely didn't want her target to know that she was watching him.

The place was hopping with kids dressed in wet suits, bathing suits, and bright tropical-print shorts. But Jenny tuned out the crowd and honed in on one guy.

Tall, dark, and gorgeous. Black leather jacket and combat boots. Add on a bad-boy image and a killer smile, and you had Jake Summers, composer, guitarist, and rebel. Jake had recently joined

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California Dreams, the rock band that Jenny and her brother Matt had started in their parents' garage.

Right now, Jake was sitting in a booth with Matt, going over some lyrics for a new song. As Jenny watched, the two guys slapped each other "five" and laughed over something. Jake and Matt had sure hit it off.

What would it take for Jake to notice the *other* Garrison in the band?

"Hey, Jen," Tiffani Smith called as she bopped in the beachside entrance. Her neon pink wet suit was unzipped down to the waist, and the bright flowers of her bikini top showed off her tan. Tiffani was a dedicated surfer, who planned her social life around the rising tide.

"How's the water?" Jenny asked her best friend.

"It's the greatest!" Tiffani smiled, tucking her damp blond hair behind her ears. She let her duffel bag drop to the floor. "I would have stayed out all afternoon, but I had a craving for some of Sharkey's crispy fries." She leaned over the counter and called back to the kitchen, "Can you get me the usual, Tony?"

Tony Wicks, the drummer for California Dreams, appeared in the kitchen doorway. Tears glistened in his dark eyes and splattered onto his Sharkey's uniform as he answered, "Anything to get

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away from this cutting board. Sharkey has had me slicing onions all afternoon." His lips quivered in a pathetic expression aimed at getting sympathy from the girls.

"That's a relief," Jenny said. "One look at you and I wondered who croaked."

"Poor baby," Tiffani crooned. "The guy sure knows how to bring tears to your eyes."

"I get no respect," Tony muttered. "And I'd much rather be beating a drum than wielding a carving knife. When is Sly going to get us another gig?"

The girls shrugged. Their manager, Sly Winkle, had a mind of his own.

"Sly's been awfully quiet lately," Jenny said. "Which probably means he's up to something."

"At least we have a few sets ready to perform," Tony said on his way to the fryer. "Back in a flash with fries and a splash."

"So . . ." Tiffani climbed onto the stool beside Jenny. "How long have you been spying on Jake?"

"What . . . ? How did you know?"

"Come on, Jen. I've known you long enough to see that you're stuck on the guy. When are you going to make your move?"

"I don't know." Jenny spun back toward the counter and shoved the sunglasses into her shiny, reddish brown hair. "Maybe tomorrow. Maybe next week. Maybe never."

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"At that rate, you may land a date by the time you're sixty," Tiffani said. "It's not like you to be unsure of yourself."

"I know," Jenny said, sighing. "It's just that it matters to me so much. I really care about what Jake thinks of me. I've never met a guy who made me care so much."

Tiffani's green eyes warmed as she smiled at her friend. "This is so romantic! Just like that commercial when the guy calls his girlfriend from Paris, and he's all wet because it's pouring rain, and she's holding the photo of—"

"Shark fries and cola," Tony interrupted, placing the order on the counter.

"Thanks." Tiffani had just begun to dig into the fries when Matt joined them at the counter.

Quickly, Jenny spun around and spotted Jake leaving Sharkey's. Where was he going? What did he do in his spare time? She wished she knew more about him. But she didn't want to let her brother know how she felt. He'd spill the beans to Jake, and then she'd be mortified.

"Where's Jake off to?" Tiffani asked.

"He promised to give his mother a lift home from work on his motorcycle," Matt explained. "Her Harley's in the shop this week."

"Really?" Tiffani asked.

Jenny squinted at her brother. "Jake's mother rides a Harley?"

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"A gnarly Harley mama?" Tony added.

With a slow grin, Matt took in their reaction and then laughed. "Gotcha! Just kidding. I mean, Jake is giving his mother a lift. But she drives a car. A Mazda. Guess that makes her a mean Mazda mom."

Jenny rolled her eyes. "Do us all a favor, Matt, and stick to songwriting."

Just then, Sly Winkle breezed into Sharkey's, and Jenny wanted to groan. Sly was the fast-talking manager of the Dreams, and he usually had a scheme or two up his sleeve.

Today was no different.

"Feast your eyes on the application that is going to make California Dreams the talk of this one-beach town," Sly said, waving a sheet of yellow paper in front of all the band members.

"Don't tell me," Tony said excitedly. "It's an application for 'Star Search.' We're going to be on TV!"

Sly shook his head. "Nope."

"It's an application for the gig at the town festival?" Matt guessed.

"Wrong," Sly said smugly.

"Did you get us another audition to play for the hog show at the county fair?" Tiffani asked, wrinkling her nose.

"Wrong again!" Sly grandly held up the yellow paper. "This is an entry form for the Pacific Coast High triathlon. Which, this year, is going to be won by California Dreams!"

The group went silent.

Where are the cheers? Sly wondered. His wide grin faded as soon as he saw the blank expressions on the band members' faces.

"Triathlon?" Tiffani frowned. "Isn't that a sporting event?"

"A swimming-biking-running sporting event," Tony added, folding his arms. "Sylvester, have you lost your mind?"

"Music," Matt said, clapping an arm over Sly's shoulders. "You're supposed to book music gigs for us."

"Not gladiator events," Jenny added.

"O ye of little vision!" Sly said, raising his hands to stop the comments from flying. "First of all, unlike most triathlons, this will be a *running-biking-swimming* sporting event. That way it can start at the school and end on the beach of the Sunnyvale Country Club. Second, if the Dreams win the race, it will mean publicity for the band. Big publicity." He straightened his vest, adding, "Besides, I'm working on getting us a gig at the party after the race."

"Let me know when you've booked the gig," Jenny said. "Till then, count me out of the triathlon."

"That goes for me, too," Tiffani added.

"Me, three." Tony picked up a rag and waved it at Sly. "There's no way I'm going to run, bike, and swim halfway around the world for some half-baked promotion scheme."

Matt was about to add his two cents when Sly stopped him.

"Now, hold on a second," Sly said. "Don't you think your manager has thought this whole thing through? First of all, the triathlon is a charity event. How can you harden your heart against people who need your support?"

"That's right." Matt snapped his fingers. "The money goes to the homeless shelter in town."

"It is a good cause," Tiffani said, softening.

"But it takes a superathlete to win a triathlon," Tony pointed out. "I mean, uh, I may be built like Schwarzenegger, but everyone isn't so lucky."

"Point number two," Sly went on, glaring at Tony. "The race is not an ironman competition. Instead of one person going through every event, our local race committee designed this baby for teams. It's a relay race. One guy does the running, then passes the baton on to someone else to do the biking, then someone else for the swimming."

"What a relief," Jenny said sarcastically. "That way we can share the pain."

"Don't worry," Sly said, giving her a cutting look. "You're not on the team, anyway."

"What do you mean?" Jenny asked.

"Jennifer, Jennifer," Sly said smugly. "We want to win the race—not just come in for a cute finish. We'll have Matt do the running. Jake can ride in the biking event, and Tony will do the swimming."

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An all-male team? Jenny felt her face heat up with anger. Sly had done it again.

Tony shook his head. "Back up, Sylvester. You're running too fast there."

Fighting to keep her cool, Jenny pointed out, "Sly, if it's the California Dream Team, it should represent the band. That includes Tiffani and me."

Tiffani nodded. "I'm an experienced swimmer, and Jenny's in good shape, too."

"Of course!" Sly smacked his forehead. "Great idea! Picture this: You two girls will be stationed beachside, wearing teeny-weeny bikinis to distract the other teams."

"Sylvester . . .," Tony said, noticing that the girls' anger was heating up.

"That's poor sportsmanship!" Tiffani huffed.

"Not to mention sexist," Jenny added, glaring at Sly. "Put that in your teeny-weeny brain and mull it over."

"Whoa!" Matt held up his arms to separate Sly and Jenny. "Let's talk this out—peacefully. Sly," he said, turning to the band manager, "What's your role in all this? I mean, what leg of the race are you running?"

"I'm the strategist," Sly shrugged. "Somebody's got to mastermind this thing."

"Weaseling out of the competition?" Jenny said, batting her eyelashes at Sly.

"She's right," Matt eyed Sly, making him take a step back. "As usual, you're no guts, all glory."

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"Besides, I'm not a great swimmer," Tony said quietly, as if it pained him to admit it. "There weren't too many country clubs in the neighborhood I grew up in. And it's kind of hard to learn the breast stroke in the spray from an open hydrant."

"So Tony can run and Matt can swim," Sly gave a frustrated huff. "Kids, you're all missing my point. Publicity. Promotion. Gigs. Money. Does any of that ring a bell?"

"We're all for promoting the Dreams," Jenny said firmly. She was still stewing over Sly's sexist views. "But we do have our principles. And one of them is that the girls in this band be treated as equals."

"That's right," Tiffani said fervently.

Sly paused for a moment and then puckered his full lips into a sad expression. "Girls, don't take this personally. It's not your fault that guys are just built to be better athletes than girls. It comes to us naturally. But I'm sure you're better at other things . . . like cooking or sewing."

"Sly—" Jenny gritted her teeth. The guy really knew how to get her steamed up.

"Red alert," Matt said.

"Somebody dial nine-one-one before those two burn Sharkey's place to the ground," Tony said quickly.

Just then, Jake returned.

As he cut through a crowd of surfers gathered

at the door, Jenny felt her heart start to beat faster. This was ridiculous! If Jake was going to be in the band and if this heart-racing thing kept up, she'd have a coronary by the end of the week!

"Jake! My man!" Sly said, clapping a hand on Jake's shoulder. "You're here just in time to prove a point."

Jake's dark eyes stared forward, but his body stiffened at Sly's touch. "Tell me you're not touching me, Winkle."

Quickly, Sly extracted his hand. "Sorry. I just got a little carried away in the excitement of competition. Let's see . . . what should we use for the challenge? Something to separate the men from the girls."

"How about the jukebox?" Matt suggested. "I saw Sharkey trying to move it last week, and the thing didn't budge."

"The jukebox!" Sly said theatrically. He crossed the room toward the vestibule containing the pay phone and jukebox, and the gang followed.

"That thing's been broken for weeks, but Sharkey can't find anyone to come and ship it out," Tony explained.

"A perfect challenge." Sly patted the chrome trim of the record machine. "What do you think, Jake? Can you move this mountain?"

"Never tried to," Jake said, looking around. He could see that Jenny and Tiffani seemed upset. It

looked like he'd missed an important part of this conversation. Besides that, Sly's big mouth had attracted a crowd of curious kids. "Exactly what is going on here?" Jake asked.

"Just a little experiment we're conducting with the girls," Sly said quickly. "Want to give it a shot?"

Jake glanced at Matt, who shrugged.

What does that mean? Jake wondered. He didn't want to make the girls any more mad than they already were. But he also couldn't wimp out in front of this crowd.

Without another word, Jake stepped up to the jukebox and pressed against it. The thing was solid as a rock.

He grabbed the old metal machine lower and wedged the soles of his black boots against the floor. Jake pushed with all his might, his knuckles turning white. . . .

And nothing happened.

The crowd was quiet now. The moment was tense.

Jake stepped back and took a deep breath. He was going to lick this baby if it killed him. This time, he pressed his shoulder against the machine, like a quarterback barreling into the pack.

For a few seconds, the rock didn't budge. Then it happened. The jukebox scraped along the floor, moving barely an inch. The motion jarred the thing to life.

A murmur of approval buzzed through the crowd as a disc dropped onto the turntable and a rock 'n' roll song blasted through the air.

"Yes!" Sly shouted, raising his hands victoriously.

"Nice going," Tony said with a broad smile. "Sharkey will like this. There might even be a bonus in it for me."

"But let's not forget part two of the challenge," Sly said, gesturing toward the jukebox. "Ladies? If you will?"

"This is ridiculous," Jenny muttered to Tiffani.

"I know," Tif whispered. "But we can't back out now."

Tiffani went first. Grinding her teeth and groaning, she pushed the machine. Unfortunately, nothing happened. The machine didn't budge. In fact, as if to spite her, the record played on.

When it was Jenny's turn, she threw herself against the jukebox and pushed with every ounce of strength in her body. *I can do this!* she kept saying to herself. But after a few attempts, she knew it was useless.

The girls were defeated.

"I rest my case," Sly announced. "Let's hear it for Jake, the jukebox hero!"

The crowd applauded, their cheers burning Jenny's ears. How could Sly get away with his antics?

"Okay, Sly," Jenny said. "So we can't move a jukebox. Big deal. That doesn't mean we're inferior."

"And you'd better not treat us that way," Tiffani added, throwing an arm around her best friend.

"Hold on one second," Matt said. His brown eyes were thoughtful as he looked down at his sister. "Sly does have a point. Nothing against you girls, but this reminds me of all those times around the house when Dad and I have to lift furniture whenever Mom redecorates."

"You know," Tony added, rubbing his chin, "the same thing happens whenever we have a gig. When it's time to lug around the band's amps and my drum set, Matt, Jake, and I are the ones who do the grunt work."

"Are you trying to say we're incapable?" Jenny demanded. "That we're weaklings?"

"You took the words right out of my mouth," Sly said.

Silently, Jake backed away to take in the ugly scene. Had he started this argument—or only made it worse?

"I'm just saying that you girls don't always exert yourselves," Matt said. "You sit back and let the guys do the dirty work."

"Well, that's going to change," Jenny vowed.

"Absolutely!" Tiffani agreed.

Jenny's brown eyes sparkled with fury as she

insisted, "Women have their strengths, and we're going to prove it!"

"Right!" Tiffani did a few jumping jacks and then shadowboxed with her fists. "We'll exert like there's no tomorrow!"

"This means war," Jenny said, lifting the triathlon application from the counter. "We'll form our own team for the race. A team with a feminine advantage."

"But what about the Dream Team?" Tony asked.

"Who's going to cheer us on?" Sly asked pathetically. "Who'll feed us? Hand us cool drinks? Console us when we're down?" He slipped his arm around Jenny's shoulders, adding, "And what about those teeny-weeny bikinis?"

"You've got to be kidding," Jenny muttered.

Stepping over to the counter, Tiffani reached into her duffel bag. She pulled out what looked like a clump of string and cloth, and then tossed it at Sly. "Guess you'll have to lead the cheers. Jenny and I are going to be busy—winning the race!"

Chapter 2

Jenny . . . Tif . . . war!" Sly called after the girls. He had to fumble to hold onto the cloth that Tiffani had thrown at him.

But they were already storming out the door of Starkey's.

Untangling the strings, Sly held the garment against his chest and realized it was a bright yellow bikini dotted with tiny flowers.

"Definitely not your color, Winkle," Jake said.

With an embarrassed look, Sly crumpled the bikini into a ball and dropped it onto a nearby table. "Leave it to the girls to overreact," he said, sighing.

"Did they have a choice?" Jake asked flatly.

Before Sly could answer, he was distracted by a group of girls who were checking out the selections

on the jukebox. "Duty calls," he said, proving his way into the group.

"Was that *duty*? Or *cutie*?" Tony muttered as he went off to clean some now-empty tables.

Jake rubbed his temples as the crowd began to break up. He was annoyed that Sly had pitted him against the girls before he'd realized what was going on. Now Jenny was fuming mad, and as far as she was concerned, Jake was part of the enemy.

"Hey, Jake." Bambi Cohen slipped a hand over one of his arms and gave a squeeze. "Nice biceps. That thing with the jukebox? It was amazing—totally! I always thought you were a hunk. But I never knew you were a man of steel, too."

"Yeah, well, I usually don't wear my Superman cape in public," Jake said, extracting himself from her grip.

With big blond curls, painted blue eyes, and lips caked with gooey red lipstick, Bambi was typical of the kind of girl who fell for Jake—the total bim-bette. She was nice enough, but after a few minutes, Bambi ran out of conversation. Lights on upstairs, but nobody home.

Jake returned to the booth, where Matt was jotting down an idea for a song. He was humming to himself, unfazed by the blowup that had just taken place.

"Doesn't it bother you that half of our band just declared war and marched out the door?" Jake asked.

Matt shrugged. "Jenny's my sister, and Tiffani doesn't know how to hold a grudge. They'll get over it. Now . . . what rhymes with rain?"

"Try pain," Jake answered. "Which is what we're going to be feeling if we don't settle up with the girls."

"I'm telling you, they're harmless," Matt insisted. He looked up from his lyrics sheet to study Jake. The guy was raking his hands through his dark hair, giving new meaning to the expression *tearing your hair out*. Matt was surprised to see the "king of cool" so rattled.

"Wait a minute." Matt chewed on his pencil thoughtfully. "Something tells me you're interested in more than just making peace with the girls. Maybe just one girl in particular?"

"Bingo." Jake pushed the salt and pepper shakers aside and faced Matt. "The truth is, I'm really into your sister, Garrison. But let one word slip out, and you're dead meat."

Matt raised his hands defensively. "Not a word! I won't say anything. I won't even think about it." The last thing he wanted to do was cross Jake. They'd gotten along pretty well since Jake had come to Pacific Coast High. But no one knew exactly why

Jake had been transferred out of his last school. Had he really beaten up the quarterback and blown up the school board? Or was it all rumor . . . the legend of Jake Sommers?

"Good." Jake nodded. "So tell me . . ." He looked around to make sure no one was listening. "What's Jenny really like?"

"Good question." Matt frowned. "I've lived with her for sixteen years . . . seems like sixty. But I've never been able to figure my sister out. She has a mind of her own. And when she's on a rampage, you don't want to cross her."

"Dangerous . . .," Jake said thoughtfully. "I like it. What kind of guy does she usually go for?"

"She's pretty picky," Matt said, thinking back over Jenny's handful of boyfriends. "Let's see. The last guy she went out with was Grant White. He's over by the video games."

Jake checked out the guys hanging out in the video section and groaned. "Country clubbers? Which one?"

"White visor and white shorts," Matt whispered.

"A real marshmallow. I've seen that dude driving a shiny Corvette around town. Nice wheels. The guy must be loaded."

Matt nodded. "Grant's father merely owns the Sunnyvale Country Club. Not to mention most of Sunnyvale."

"Too rich for my blood," Jake said, sighing. There was no way he could compete with a guy who had every luxury money could buy.

"As I said, Jenny's picky," Matt added.

"And what makes you think I'm not a top pick?" Jake asked, bluffing. He couldn't let on to Garrison that he was disappointed.

Matt just shrugged and let the subject drop.

Which was a good thing. Jake was dead in the water, and he hated admitting defeat. So Jenny liked rich guys. Bummer.

But Jake couldn't give up. There was something about Jenny, a certain spark in her eyes that burned an unforgettable brand in his mind. He would just have to prove to her that you don't have to be rich to have fun.

"Hot news flash!" Sly said, pounding his hands on their table. He waved Tony over, adding, "You'll want to hear this."

"Anything to escape kitchen duty," Tony said, tucking a tray under his arm.

"The Sly-Master has done it again. While you guys were staring off at the surf outside, I was working the crowd at the jukebox."

"So?" Matt seemed bored. "Did you land a date with Bambi Cohen?"

"Work before pleasure, Matt," Sly insisted. "I charmed Anna Stravinsky into giving me a hot tip on a gig at Sunnyvale!"

"The country club?" Matt's eyes went round. "This sounds like a real job."

"I'm impressed," Jake said. Then he grabbed onto Sly's vest and pulled him forward, adding, "As long as it pays."

"Of course, of course!" Sly assured them. "Money is the main motivator."

"Sunnyvale . . ." With a proud grin, Tony brushed off the shoulder of the T-shirt that all the Sharkey's employees had to wear. "Looks like California Dreams is moving up in the world."

"Stand by for more details," Sly told the guys. "Aura said they're looking for someone to play this week. All I have to do is call this number and—ba-boom—we do the gig and get cold cash in our pocket."

"Sounds good," Matt said. "And it might give us the in we need at Sunnyvale. The triathlon ends up on the club's beachfront, and Sunnyvale is hosting the big beach blast."

"Now, that's a super-cool-to-die-for gig," Tony said. "That party is the blowout of the season."

Jake looked around at the other guys. "If the triathlon party is such a hit, why aren't the Dreams performing at it?"

Everyone looked at Sly, who rolled his eyes. "I'm working on it! Some people are so demanding."

While the guys talked on about the triathlon,

Tony's eyes wandered to the counter where Neena Holmes was twirling around on a stool.

"Excuse me," Tony told the others, "but my lady is waiting."

He grabbed his tray, never taking his eyes off the sultry surfer chick whose dark hair was pulled back in a braid. Her skin was like warm cocos. Her smile could melt an iceberg. Her body . . . well, Neena was dynamic in the looks department.

Tony moved behind the counter and sauntered over to where Neena was sitting. Her dark stare was glued to the menu on the wall over Tony's head. She was hot.

"What can I get you, lovely lady?" Tony offered, leaning over the counter to stare into her beautiful face. "Shark burger? Milk shake? Or my undying love, forever and ever?"

"Get real." Neena closed one eye as if she couldn't believe what she was seeing. "I'll take a vanilla shake, easy on the sweet talk. Your rap is tired, Wicks."

"It's no rap," Tony insisted as he jotted down her order. "When I speak to you, the words come straight from my heart."

"That's funny," she said. "I thought I heard you using the same line on Yolanda Williams just last week."

"That was different," Tony insisted,

"Right. Different week, different girl," Neena said flatly.

"Neena . . ." Tony was losing ground. "What would it take to prove to a drop-dead gorgeous creature like yourself that Tony Wicks is the dude of your dreams?"

Neena sighed. "Well, first of all, you don't ever hang on the beach. All of my friends ride the waves. You and I just don't have enough in common, Tony."

"I'm taking lessons," Tony lied, handing Neena her shake.

"Really?" Neena seemed doubtful. "That's a start. But surfing isn't a sport. It's a way of life."

"Don't I know it." Tony pointed out toward the oceanfront. "When the whitecaps come rolling in . . . when the big waves curl . . . all I can think about is getting totally tubed. With you by my side."

Tony's lie was getting inflated, just like a giant inner tube puffed up with air. But he couldn't help himself.

For a moment, Neena seemed to be hypnotized by his words as she looked toward the ocean. "That's it . . . the surfing spirit!" She flashed him a big smile that made Tony's heart race.

"So . . ." he murmured, leaning close. "Are my chances improving?"

"Definitely," Neena told him. "I'll look for you out on the water, Tony." With that, she grabbed her shake and headed back out to the beach.

As he watched her go, Tony wanted to kick himself. He couldn't surf. He couldn't even stay afloat in the bathtub! But if Neena knew the truth, she wouldn't give him the time of day.

At that moment, he made a decision.

Tony Wicks, former city boy, was going to go Californian. That meant learning to swim. As far as surfing went . . . well, first things first. If it meant a chance to capture the wild heart of Neena "Queen of the Waves" Holmes, he would finally take the lessons his parents had been bugging him about.

I just hope I don't end up drowning in a sea of love! Tony thought to himself.

Chapter 3

The next day, Jenny was still annoyed with the guys in the band, though her anger had cooled from a boil to a slow burn. Fortunately, Matt had spent last night in his room, and she hadn't run into any of the guys this morning at school.

Maybe they felt bad and were trying to keep a low profile. *Ha!* she thought. *They're afraid to come out and apologize.*

"Today is the deadline for triathlon entries," Tiffani said as she shut her locker.

Jenny frowned. "And after the way the guys tried to humiliate us yesterday, I'm tempted to actually sign up."

"Tempted?" Tiffani seemed confused. "I thought we were definitely joining the race. We've

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got to do it, Jenny. Even if we don't win, we need to stand up for our sex!"

"But there are only two of us," Jenny pointed out as the girls turned into Ms. Canton's civics class.

"Don't worry," Tiffani said as the bell rang. "We'll recruit a third girl."

Jenny's mind wandered as Ms. Canton began the lesson. She imagined herself sweating as she trudged up a hill under the hot sun. Then she would jump on a bike and pedal like crazy, pumping faster and faster until she passed Matt and Jake and Tony and Sly. "Eat my dust!" she would shout as she passed them. Then she would dive into the ocean for the final round.

In the end, she would reach the dock first—just seconds before the muscle-bound jocks who usually won the event.

She would ignore the cheering crowds and the roar of applause for the real moment of victory—the chance to see the hangdog expressions on the faces of the guys in the band. . . .

"Jenny?" Tiffani squeezed her arm, snapping her out of her daydream. "Did you pick a project?"

"What?" Jenny had missed most of the civics class.

"We need to choose something from the list," Tiffani said, pointing to the assignment Ms. Canton had handed out. "How about one of the group projects? It would be fun to work together."

"Sure." Jenny skimmed the list. "Conduct a survey. . . . Write a book report . . ."

Tiffani wrinkled her nose. "Boring."

Jenny had made it halfway through the list when one of the choices sparked off an idea. "Listen to this. 'Organize your own campaign! Set a goal. Determine a strategy. Then enlist and organize workers.'" She checked off the choice with her pen. "This is the perfect project for us."

Tiffani shook her head. "Just a few months too late, Madam President. Student government elections are over."

"But today is only Tuesday. We have a few days before Saturday's triathlon," Jenny pointed out.

It took a minute for the idea to click in Tiffani's head. "Are you saying we should make the triathlon our project?" she asked. "Do you think Ms. Canton will go for it?"

"Absolutely," Jenny insisted. "We'll try to get one of the school's top athletes on our team. Someone like Linda McGuire or Neena Holmes."

"I can talk to Neena," Tiffani offered. "We hang out together while we're waiting for the big waves to come."

"You're in charge of recruitment," Jenny said.

"Gosh," Tiffani said thoughtfully. "With someone like Neena on our team, we might actually have a chance of winning."

"Or at least we might beat the Dream Team,"

Jenny said, her dark eyes gleaming as she plotted. "We can call ourselves the Feminine Faction. And we can rally for support from the other girls at school. By the time Saturday rolls around, we'll have every girl at Pacific Coast High rooting for our team!"

The girls wasted no time. They presented their project to Ms. Canton right away, and she approved.

"An innovative idea," the teacher told them. "But just be sure to set up clear goals for the campaign and stick to them. A good strategist maintains control of her campaign."

"Yes, ma'am," Jenny said, smiling. But the words had little meaning. Once again, she was imagining the thrill of defeating the Dream Team.

"Boy, Jenny," Tiffani smothered a smile. "You can really plot a war when you put your mind to it."

"I don't get mad," Jenny said coolly. "I get even."

"So what's our goal?" Tiffani asked as she drew doodles in the margin of her notebook. The music and laughter of Sharkey's made it a little hard to concentrate, especially when Tif knew that the waves were breaking so beautifully just a few yards away. She would rather be surfing . . . the story of her life!

After school, the girls had headed off to Sharkey's and commandeered an empty booth to use as what Jenny called a think tank.

California Dreams

"Let's see," Jenny pursed her lips together thoughtfully. "Our goal is to make people—especially guys—aware that women are just as capable as men."

"I like it," Tiffani said as she jotted down notes. "And our strategy is to get attention by competing in the triathlon."

"Right," Jenny said. "But we have to get the word out about our team. We can make posters that explain what the Feminine Faction is all about."

"We can organize a pep rally before the race!" Tiffani suggested.

"We can hand out flyers!"

"Print up bumper stickers!"

"Plaster banners all over Sharkey's walls!"

"What was that?" Tony had come over to their table, his order pad in hand.

"We're planning our publicity campaign for the Feminine Faction," Tiffani explained. "Our triathlon team."

"Girls only," Jenny added.

"I see." Tony stuck his pencil behind his ear.

"So you're going through with the race?"

Jenny nodded. "Definitely."

"Absolutely," Tiffani added.

"Well, good luck," Tony said sincerely. "And I want you to know that I'm sorry about what happened here yesterday. That thing with the jukebox was stupid."

The Dream Team

The girls could tell that Tony was speaking from the heart.

"Apology accepted," Jenny said.

Tiffani jumped up and gave him a quick hug. "You know I can never stay mad at you," she said affectionately.

"Tif, you can't stay mad at a cockroach," Jenny said.

"That's beside the point," Tiffani insisted.

"We're still going to run the race," Jenny told Tony. "And with some luck and our not-so-secret weapon, we might beat the Dream Team."

"Don't look now," Tiffani said, staring over Jenny's head. "But that weapon just walked in the door."

"Hey, girls!" Neena Holmes smiled as she leaned her surfboard against the wall and came over to their table. "Bobo said you were looking for me." Bobo was the guru of surfers, a college kid who spent most of his time studying the waves.

Tony's heart skipped a beat as Neena brushed past him and scooted into the booth. "Sharkey should give me a hard hat," he said. "With all the dynamite beauties around, things could get explosive."

But the Wicks charm seemed to roll right off Neena. "How are the lessons going?" she asked.

"Okay," he said quietly, and then changed the subject before the other girls could pick up on his lie. He took their order and made a beeline for the

California Dreams

safety of the kitchen. Neena was going to be his fatal attraction, unless he learned how to swim—fast!

Back at the table, Jenny and Tiffani were explaining their plan to Neena. "Since you're one of the best athletes at school, we thought of you immediately," Jenny explained.

"Cross-country trophies and medals in track," Tiffani said. "You'd be perfect for the running segment of the race."

"I hate to give up a whole Saturday," Neena said thoughtfully.

"But your part of the race should take less than an hour," Jenny explained.

"And the triathlon ends up at the Sunnyvale Country Club," Tiffani added. "It's just down the road from Kahuna Cove, where the waves are supposed to be great. You can run and surf, too."

"Please?" Jenny begged.

Neena bit her lip and then nodded. "Okay, okay. I like the cause. Count me in."

"All right!" Tiffani exclaimed.

"Thanks, Neena," Jenny said. "Believe me, you're going to be the star of our team."

"The race will be fun," Neena said. "But I've been dying to surf the big Kahuna."

That night, California Dreams met in the Garrisons' garage for their usual practice. But things got off to a rocky start.

The Dream Team

Except for Tony, none of the guys had said a word to the girls all day. Tiffani wanted to shrug the whole thing off, but Jenny felt differently. Didn't she and Tif deserve an apology?

Besides that issue, she had to question her feelings for Jake. How could she be so crazy about a guy who didn't seem to have a clue about women's rights and equality?

Matt took a deep breath and sang, "If you lean on me, I will lean on you . . ."

Behind the drum set, Tony kept the song moving. His head nodded in time with the beat.

Tiffani closed her eyes, getting into the song as she plucked the strings of her electric bass.

Matt and Jake put their heads together as they jammed on their electric guitars, completely in sync.

Even Sly, who was stretched out on one of the Garrisons' old overstuffed chairs, seemed to be grooving to the music.

Am I the only person who's upset about this? Jenny wondered. Just then, her fingers slipped on the keyboard of the synthesized piano, and she hit a bitter-sounding chord.

Quickly trying to get back on track, she stabbed at the keys, but the result was a harsh, fluttering sound.

The music ground to a halt, and everyone turned to look at Jenny.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Matt asked.

Jenny nodded.

"Okay." Mutt sat back on a wooden crate and cradled his guitar in his lap. "I'm sorry we argued yesterday. But I still stand by my point. A lot of the times, you girls sit back and let the guys do the heavy work."

"We heard your complaint—loud and clear," Jenny told him.

"From now on, we're going to pitch in when it comes time to move and set up equipment," Tiffani promised.

"And as far as I'm concerned," Jake added, "I'm behind you girls all the way. That thing with the jukebox . . . well, I wouldn't have gotten involved if I'd known what Sly was trying to prove. It was hardly a scientific experiment," he said, scowling at Sly, who was still flaked out on the chair.

A tiny glimmer of hope flickered inside Jenny. Maybe Jake wasn't such a bad guy after all.

"This whole thing has been blown way out of proportion," Sly said, standing up and stretching lazily. "Let's all kiss and make up." He puckered his lips and edged toward Tiffani.

"In your dreams," Tif said, pushing him away.

"Nice try, Sly-Mold," Jenny muttered. Leave it to Sly to try to weasel out of any sort of apology.

"Can we just call a truce?" Matt suggested. "So what if we're competing with each other in the triathlon? The event is for charity. And in the meantime, this band has a lot of practicing to do."

"Especially if that gig at Sunnyvale comes through," Sly reminded them.

"I'm all for peace and harmony," Tiffani said hopefully.

"We can't let a stupid bust-your-buns race stand between us," Tony insisted. He took Tiffani's hand and held it up.

Matt stood up and clutched their hands. "United we stand."

"Count me in," Jake said, grasping the link of hands.

"Okay," Jenny agreed, joining the huddle and adding her hand to the pack. "It's a truce." Jake's hand was warm under hers, and she wondered if he felt any of the sparks that seemed to fly whenever they were together.

"Whatever." With an embarrassed look, Sly pressed into the huddle, touched the knot of hands, and then withdrew. "Enough with the touchy-feely stuff. We've got a few sets to practice!"

Finally in tune with each other, the Dreams made it through the rest of their practice without a single glitch.

This is the way it should be, Jenny said to herself, her spirits lifting as she belted out a line and Matt and Tiffani harmonized behind her. It felt so good when the band was in sync.

When practice broke up, Jenny went into the house to finish some homework. Sly and Jake decid-

even get away with it . . . though this was no time for a romantic moment.

Especially not with her brother and the rest of the band watching!

"I don't know," Jenny answered. A tingle shot up her arm as Jake pulled his hand away and squatted in front of her.

"See if you can stand on it," he suggested.

She wriggled her toes, stepped forward, and winced. "I can walk on it. It's probably just bruised."

"So is our amp," Sly observed, tipping it sideways so that everyone could see the crack along the bottom.

"Doesn't look good," Tony said sadly.

"We'd better get it inside and test it," Matt suggested. "Along with the rest of the equipment."

Tiffani linked her arm through Jenny's and looked into her eyes sympathetically. "Do you want me to help you inside?" she offered.

"No, thanks," Jenny said, sighing. "We can't make the guys do everything. I have to bite the bullet and help set up."

"Just stop if your foot starts to feel worse," Tiffani advised as they walked back to the car.

The girls loaded up their arms with cables and guitars and then headed inside.

As Jenny limped along the corridor, she felt like an Al idiot. Instead of proving that she was just

as capable as the guys, she'd made a fool of herself, smashing her toe and cracking the amplifier. Her plan had completely backfired.

"Bzzzz!"

"What's that awful noise?" Tiffani asked as the girls turned into the crowded rec room.

"That," Tony answered, "is the sound of a broken amp." He was looking at the front of the room, where Matt and Jake were bent over the amp, turning knobs to filter out the horrendous sound. The noise caused a stir in the audience, and people were pointing at Matt and plugging up their ears.

Sly frowned. "It's a good thing we always travel with more than one amplifier. Looks like you totaled it," he told Jenny.

"That's just great!" Jenny snapped. "I'm going to have to pay to fix the amp that I broke. I'm going to have to ride in the triathlon with an aching toe. What next?"

"How about going to the triathlon with the Sly-Master of your dreams?" Sly suggested, flashing Jenny a debonair smile.

"Just when I thought things couldn't get any worse," Jenny muttered as she spun away from him and limped over to set up the electric piano.

"Boy, Sly," Tiffani shook her head. "You really know how to kick a girl when she's down."

"Would a date with me be *that* bad?" Sly asked.

California Dreams

When Tiffani didn't answer, Tony put a hand on his friend's back and told him, "Don't press your luck, Sylvester."

"Just let me lie here in the sun, until my dream is done." Jenny sang the last line of their final song and closed her eyes as the piano notes faded and Tony made a sizzling noise on the cymbals.

Spellbound, the audience remained silent, as if holding on to the magical moment. Then applause spread through the room like wildfire. Some of the men let out a few hurrahs and whistles. Many of the women blinked back tears, moved by the song.

It had been a great performance.

"Thank you, and good night," Matt told the audience. The overhead lights came on, and people began to stand up, stretch, and shuffle down the aisle.

Sighing, Jenny folded her arms and smiled at the other band members. When their music went well, they all felt so close. And tonight, enveloped by the incredible warmth generated by their appreciative audience, the Dreams felt a special bond. This was the reason they were together. Music . . . and love.

"Great show," Matt congratulated the other band members.

"Way cool," Jake agreed.

Sly crept over to the front of the room and gave the kids a thumbs-up. "You sure won that crowd

The Dream Team

over," he told them. "Too bad there's no cashola in this gig."

"Sly, is that the only thing you ever think of?"

Jenny asked in disgust.

"I'm a manager," Sly shrugged. "Money is my business."

Just then, Mrs. McDimple strolled up to the front of the room and stepped behind Jenny's microphone. "And that concludes our twilight concert," she said. "We'd like to thank California Dreams for entertaining us. And don't forget that tomorrow's breakfast will be a buffet on the sunporch. Good night, all!"

Mrs. McDimple stepped away from the mike and squeezed Jenny's hand. "You were wonderful, dear." She nodded at the other band members. "All of you. Very talented."

"Thanks, ma'am," Jake said politely.

"Aren't you going to introduce me, Iris?" a thin, elderly woman called from the edge of the lighting set. She held a pearl-handled cane, which she was tapping against the floor impatiently.

Jenny thought the woman looked vaguely familiar, but she couldn't place her. She had brown, freckled skin and deep-set dark eyes that hinted of mysterious things. A scarlet hat with a jaunty ostrich feather was pinned to her silver hair.

"Of course, dear," Iris McDimple said, motioning the thin black woman forward. "California

Dreams, I'd like you to meet my good friend Maisie Pearl. She's a musician, just like you folks."

"A jazz musician," Maisie corrected her friend as she used her cane to maneuver over a bunch of cables on the floor.

"Maisie Pearl?" Matt snapped his fingers and then stepped toward the woman and extended a hand. "I've heard of you. My dad has some of your records. You've got an amazing voice."

"Had, boy," she insisted. "Past tense."

"Maisie is retired now," Mrs. McDimple explained. "She's turning ninety this week!"

"Ninety!" Tony whistled. "You don't look a day over sixty."

"Don't flatter me, young man," Maisie teased, jabbing a finger at Tony. "I've got grandchildren who're older than you!"

"Our father still plays your records," Jenny told Maisie. In her mind, she was comparing the real-life Maisie with the face on the record jacket and remembering the woman's rich, deep voice ringing through their living room.

"Music does live on," Maisie said thoughtfully. "Those records will probably outlast me. But that's old news. Reason I dragged my tired bones up here was to tell you kids that I liked your show. You even kept George Embers awake, and that old coot never misses his evening nap."

"Thanks," everyone murmured.

"The Dreams aim to please," Sly said in that hyped-up tone that made him sound like a used-car salesman. "In fact, we took this gig hoping that the exposure would get us a shot at the triathlon party. But I don't suppose that the Sunnyvale Retirement Home has any connection with the country club?" he asked hopefully.

"Our sunroom overlooks their golf course," Maisie answered dryly. "But that's about as close as it gets. Now tell me," she said, turning back to the band members. "Who writes your material?"

"I did our first few songs," Matt explained. "Now that Jake's in the band, we've starting writing together."

While Maisie, Jake, and Matt discussed music, the other band members started to pack up the equipment. When everything was ready to stow in the car, Maisie Pearl and Iris McDimple were still lingering in the rec room, chattering and joking with the band. Jenny was glad that the Dreams had some new fans—maybe even some new friends.

"Do come back and see us again," Iris McDimple told the kids as they picked up guitar cases and mike stands. "You were one of the few bands that didn't blast us out of the room with mega-volume."

"We were short one amp," Matt explained, shooting a glance at his sister. "Fortunately, it didn't seem to matter with the acoustics of the rec room."

"Don't rub it in," Jenny said under her breath.

Matt had a way of remembering her little mistakes for years and years. Were all brothers like that?

By the time Matt backed the Garrisons' station wagon up to the garage door on Ocean Drive, the sky was dark blue and the ringing sound of crickets filled the air. Matt pushed the gears into park and cut the engine as the rest of the gang began to tumble out of the car.

"It's already eight," Tony said, looking at his watch. "I'd help unload, but I've got . . . stuff to do." He didn't want to admit exactly what that stuff was. He and Tiffani were supposed to head back to the country club for another swimming lesson. Tif had called it a crash course—a term that gave Tony a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"I've got plans, too," Tiffani said, giving Tony a cryptic look. She thought it was so cute that Tony wanted to keep his swimming lessons a secret. Boys had such a problem with that ego stuff!

"You're home at last!" Mr. Garrison said as he appeared in the doorway connecting the garage to the house. "Matt, your mom and I have spent the last half hour entertaining some guests for you. Stephanie, Randi Jo, and Mallory are waiting in the kitchen. What's with this group-dating thing?"

Jenny rolled her eyes as she pulled the electric piano out of the back of the car. Apparently, Operation: Date-Till-You-Drop was still going strong.

"I almost forgot!" Matt smacked his forehead. "The four of us have a date to see the movie *Everlasting Love*."

"The four of us?" Sly repeated. "I don't know what all those girls suddenly see in you, but share the wealth with your friend Sly. Let some of it rub off on me." He rubbed Matt's head as if it were a magic lamp.

"Cut it out," Matt said, pushing Sly away.

"Could be the old Garrison charm," Mr. Garrison said with a proud smile. "Before I married your mother, the chicks really hounded me, too."

"But Matt's never been such a hot item before," Tony pointed out. From Tony's confused expression, it was clear that he was baffled by Matt's sudden popularity. "He used to be the one doing the sounding."

"I'd better get going," Matt said, holding up the car keys. "Who's unloading the car?"

"I've got an appointment," Tony said, shaking his head.

"Me, too," Tiffani added.

Sly backed toward the door, searching his mind for a good excuse. "I've . . . got some phone calls to make." He hated this part of every gig—the goat work.

Jake glanced over at Jenny and shrugged. "Looks like it's you and me, Jen." He held his hands up, and Matt tossed him the car keys.

"My harem awaits," Matt said, bounding up the steps and into the house.

"Would you like some company?" Sly called, following behind Matt. "I'd be willing to take one of the girls off your hands. Maybe even two..."

"I thought Sly had some phone calls to make," Jake said as the two guys disappeared inside the house.

"That's just Sly's way of saying 'Do it yourself,'" Jenny explained. "When there's work to be done, Sly gets invisible."

"Thanks for unloading," Tiffani told Jake and Jenny.

"Ditto," Tony added. "We'll see you tomorrow."

After they left, Jenny looked from Jake to the loaded car and then back to Jake again. "We've got our work cut out for us," she said.

With a lazy smile, Jake leaned back on the tailgate and pulled out a chrome mike stand. "We'll work as a team and it'll go fast," he said, handing Jenny the mike stand. "Just promise me you'll take it easy. I don't like to see you in pain. Makes me hurt for you."

"Really?" Jenny smiled. "I never thought I'd hear Jake the he-man admitting that he had feelings."

"Real men can have strong emotions," Jake said seriously. "It's the wimps who are afraid to be honest with themselves."

They talked and joked as they shifted the

equipment from the car to the garage. When it came time to move the amps, Jake made sure they took it slowly. It took them a good half hour to do the job, but Jenny enjoyed every minute of it. When she was working side by side with Jake, it was easy to relax and act naturally. He was so much fun to be with. When they were taking care of band business, she didn't choke up and say goofy things.

"That was some gig," Jake said as he finished tightening the legs on the electric piano. "For a minute there, I was afraid that the old-timers were going to rap their canes on the floor and demand some tunes from the forties. But I have to give them credit. They were receptive to our music."

"And it was a thrill to meet Maisie Pearl," Jenny said, stifling a yawn. "Boy, am I beat." She switched off the overhead light and collapsed on the faded sofa that had once graced the Garrisons' den. The lamp over her dad's workbench cast a yellow glow through the garage. It made the room seem warm and cozy.

Jake played a few chords on the electric piano and then shut it off. "That's all set for tomorrow's rehearsal."

"Good," Jenny said, rolling her shoulders. "Lugging the equipment is more work than I realized. I think every muscle in my body aches."

"You need the Jake Sommers miracle treatment," he said, sitting beside her on the couch.

ed to hang out with Matt, while Tony and Tiffani headed home.

"I'll walk you home," Tony offered. "It's kind of on the way."

They stepped out into the cool, clear night and started down the block. Ocean Drive was quiet as Tony and Tiffani walked at an easy pace, chatting about school, band practice, and Saturday's race.

"Is it true that Neena Holmes is going to be on your team for the triathlon?" Tony asked.

"Yup," Tiffani said proudly. "We're lucky to have such a superathlete."

"And such a fine lady," Tony added.

With a knowing smile, Tiffani put her hands on her hips. "I thought I was picking up on some heavy flirtation today at Sharkey's. So you like Neena?"

"Love has struck like a speeding-screaming-careening Mack truck," Tony answered.

"How romantic!" Tiffani sighed.

"I wish it were," Tony said sadly. "Neena's really into the surf world." He told her about how he'd been striking out with the girl of his dreams. "She wants me to hang ten with her. And I don't even know how to do a belly flop."

"You can't swim?"

Tony shook his head. "Not a stroke."

"Well, that's an easy problem to solve," Tiffani said cheerfully. "I'll give you lessons."

"It's not that easy," Tony pointed out. "I've

never been in the water. I don't even like to jump over puddles."

"Don't be silly," Tiffani insisted. "I'm teaching a tadpole class Thursday afternoon at the Sunnyvale Country Club. We can use the pool there. It'll be fun! Meet me there—Thursday, after school."

"Are you sure about this, Tif?" Tony asked nervously.

"Positive!" Her green eyes flashed with enthusiasm. "We'll have you swimming laps around Neena in no time!"

Chapter 4

The next day, news about the Feminine Faction began to spread like wildfire. The halls of Pacific Coast High were buzzing with word of the exclusive team that was going to go "where no girls had gone before."

On Tuesday, when Jenny and Tiffani had turned in their entry form, they'd been surprised to learn that they were the first female contenders. In the three years that the triathlon had been run for charity, girls had never participated. "We're feminist pioneers!" Tiffani had said, giving Jenny a high five.

Today at school, they were treated like celebrities. When girls stopped Jenny and Tiffani to ask about the team, they spread the word.

"We're having an organizational meeting after

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school at Sharkey's," Jenny told Randi Jo, Matt's on-again, off-again girlfriend.

"Tell anyone who's interested to meet us there," Tiffani added. "It's already Wednesday. We have a lot of things to get together by Saturday!"

"This is totally cool!" Randy Jo exclaimed, tossing her long blond ponytail. "It's about time that someone taught the guys around here a thing or two about women's rights. And I have a totally devious plan to zing the Dream Team!"

"Devious?" Tiffani wrinkled her nose. "Uhm . . . well, we're trying to keep things fair and square."

"Don't worry about a thing," Randi Jo said. "I'll explain it all at the meeting."

By the time Jenny and Tiffani walked into Sharkey's, more than a dozen girls were sitting around three tables that they'd pushed together in the center of the room.

"Over here!" Neena called.

"This is a bigger turnout than I expected," Jenny told Tiffani as they grabbed two chairs and pulled them over to the cluster of tables.

"Our sisters are supporting us," Tiffani said with a grateful smile.

"Let's hear it for the two girls who founded the Feminine Faction!" Sarah Feinsberg called out. "Tiffani Smith and Jenny Garrison!"

The girls clapped and cheered, and Jenny felt a moment of awkwardness. The girls were so determined and spirited. She just hoped that the team wouldn't let them down.

"You two put your finger on one of the biggest problems we girls face," Alexis Suarez said, standing up to get everyone's attention. "Saturday's triathlon will be more than a race. It will be a symbol of the power struggle between girls and guys!"

"That's right," Neena joined in. "We've got to show the guys, once and for all, that women are just as capable as men. We've got the power!" She stabbed her fist in the air.

The other girls followed suit, jabbing their fists in the air and shouting, "Power!" and "Females have rights, too!"

Biting her lip thoughtfully, Jenny took in the whole scene. There was a lot of passion and conviction in the girls' words. Somehow, she and Tiffani had unleashed a cry that had been restrained for a long time.

Just then, Tony came out of the kitchen with a tray of soft drinks. He passed them out to some of the girls, and then turned to Jenny and Tiffani. "Can I get you something?"

"No, thanks," Jenny said, wondering how much he'd overheard.

But Tony wasn't sticking around to eavesdrop. He'd seen the girls raising their fists in a battle cry.

When they were rallying together like this, the safest place for a lone guy was far, far away. He slung his empty tray onto the counter and ducked into the kitchen.

"I brought poster board and markers," Tiffani said, reaching down to pull a handful of felt-tip pens out of her duffel bag.

"Good!" Neena helped her unroll the sheets of paper. "Each of us should make at least one poster before this meeting is over."

"I'll make sure they get hung around the school," Sarah offered.

"I drew up this flyer, and I got it copied at my mom's office," Alexis held up a stack of bright yellow papers and then passed them around to the girls. "What do you think?"

Jenny took one of the flyers and passed the stack on. THE FEMININE FACTION was hand-printed in bold letters across the top. The rest was a typed message about supporting the girls' team in the race and about trying to make everyone more aware of women's rights.

A murmur of approval spread around the table.

"This is great, Alexis!" Tiffani said with a smile. "It'll help us inform every girl in school."

"The posters and flyers will help us get the word out to other girls," Randi Jo said. "But I have a plan that will help us disable one of our top competitors—the Dream Team."

"Really?" Neena asked.

"We don't want to *hurt* anyone," Tiffani said firmly.

"Oh, this is harmless," Randi Jo said, waving off her concern. "But it could be very effective—and a lot of fun, too!"

The girls huddled closer as Randi Jo explained her plan.

"The idea is to distract the competition," Randi Jo explained. "And having dated Matt Garrison, I know that he's a sucker for a pretty smile."

That's true, Jenny thought, though she already didn't like the sound of this plan. It reminded her of something that Sly would dream up—sneaky.

"So every eligible girl we can recruit can be involved. We'll set up a ton of dates with Matt for the rest of the week. By the time the triathlon rolls around, he'll be too tired to swim in a straight line!"

"What if Matt doesn't go for it?" Neena asked.

"Believe me, he will," Jenny said. "My brother will be so flattered, he won't know what hit him."

"Operation: Date-Till-You-Drop," Neena said with a laugh. "I like it!"

"When should we start?" asked Alexis.

"Today," Randi insisted. "If Matt doesn't show up here this afternoon, we'll call him and start setting up dates over the phone."

Jenny wasn't sure how she felt about the plan.

Would it really be as harmless as Randi Jo insisted? What if Matt really fell for one of the girls? He'd end up getting trounced . . . devastated.

On the other hand, it was just for a few days—Wednesday to Saturday. Could Matt fall for a girl that fast—especially when he'd be dating a dozen different girls?

She decided to keep her mouth shut and let Operation: Date-Till-You-Drop go ahead as planned.

The girls set to work on the posters. Sarah had a special talent for drawing large, loopy letters, so she went around the table and helped smooth out some of the droopy painting.

An hour later, the girls were nearly finished. A few girls had gathered their things and headed off to do homework or get to their after-school jobs. The girls who'd stayed behind were putting the finishing touches on the last batch of posters when Matt and Jake strolled through the door and sat down at the counter.

"Target in sight," Alexis muttered under her breath.

"I'll go first," Randi Jo whispered, handing her finished posters to Sarah. "Wish me luck!"

"Go for it, sister!" Neena told her.

Jenny watched out of the corner of her eye as Randi Jo slinked over to the counter and laid a hand on Matt's shoulder. When he turned around, she sank onto the stool beside him, crossing her long

legs and leaning back like a lazy cat. The girl had a flair for the dramatic. In fact, Jenny was surprised that Randi Jo had never tried out for any of the school plays.

"A sunset walk on the beach?" Matt repeated, his face bright with a grin. He stood up and held out his hand to Randi Jo. "Sounds like a great idea."

Randi Jo sprang out of her stool, her blond ponytail bobbing behind her. She linked her arm through Matt's and winked back at the group of girls before turning toward the door.

"Catch you later," Matt called back to Jake and Tony.

Tony cocked an eyebrow as he watched his friend stroll out the door with babe in tow. Matt had hit the jackpot today, and he made it look so easy. Maybe the casual approach was the way to go.

After Tony finished screwing the lids on the salt shakers, he took them out to the tables. He paused behind Neena's dark head and took a deep breath to bolster his confidence.

"By the way, Queenie sweet-and-lovely Neena," he said breezily. "The sun is setting, and you and I aren't getting anywhere by hanging in this two-bit shark pit." He leaned his elbow on the table so that he could peer into her pretty face. "My shift ends in fifteen minutes. How about a walk on the beach with the dude of your dreams?"

"Sorry, land lover," Neena answered, capping a

pen and pushing her chair back. "There's some major wave breakage going on out there, and I've already been on dry land for too long. Know what I mean?"

"Sure," Tony lied. "Don't want to miss the great tsunami."

"Exactly," Neena said as she headed out to the beach. "Later, dude."

Wipeout! Tony thought as he gathered up the catsup bottles. Instead of getting closer to Neena, he seemed to lose ground every time he talked to her.

Meanwhile, Jenny slid onto a stool at the counter and glanced over at Jake, who was staring off into space. His dark eyes seemed to be full of mystery, and she wondered what he was thinking about.

"Hey, Jake," she said with a nervous smile.

"Jenny." He gestured toward the kitchen and asked, "What's up? You want a Coke or something?"

"No, thanks," she said, though her throat seemed to be getting drier by the minute. Whenever she was near Jake, she seemed to choke like an actress with stage fright. What was with her racing heart, sweating palms, and dry throat? This had never happened to her before.

Could it be that she was falling . . . ?

No way. She didn't even know him that well. The only *L* word she could consider here was *Like*. And she did *like* Jake. A lot.

"How's everything going for the triathlon?" he

asked, nodding at the girls who remained at the tables.

"Fine . . . just fine," she answered lamely.

"Which event are you going to do?"

"The bike race," Jenny said.

"Me, too." Jake smiled, and his dark eyes were warm and soothing. "Guess we'll be competing with each other directly."

"Guess so," Jenny said as a thin, blond girl bounced over and slipped her hands over Jake's shoulders.

It was Bambi Cohen. "Aren't you going to come over and help me pick out something on the jukebox, Jake?"

Repulsed, Jenny watched as Bambi cooed and rubbed Jake's shoulders. Bambi was the kind of girl who could put women's lib back a hundred years. She seemed to hide behind pinned gold curls, pots of makeup, and big jewelry. And to even imply that she didn't have the skill to pick out a tune on the jukebox . . . !

"See you at band practice," Jenny said, pushing away from the counter.

She would leave Jake in Bambi's arms for now. Much as Jenny hated to admit it, even Bambi Cohen had one big edge over her. Bambi didn't fall apart when it came time to talk to a guy she liked!

Chapter 5

The genius behind California Dreams has done it again!" Sly exclaimed as he burst into the Garrisons' garage that night.

"You're late for band practice," Jenny said, her fingers fluttering over the electric piano keyboard.

Jake and Matt were tuning up their guitars. Tony sat behind his drum set, and Tiffani was perched on an amp.

"What's the big news, Sly?" Tiffani asked.

"Your amazing manager has worked his magic once again," Sly said proudly. "I booked us for a gig at the Sunnyvale Country Club. Tomorrow evening, six o'clock sharp. Be there or be square."

"Tomorrow?" Tony gave a drum roll for emphasis. "That's short notice."

"The big question is how much are they paying us?" Matt asked.

"Well . . ." Sly touched the cleft in his chin thoughtfully.

Everyone in the band could tell that he was stalling.

"Well, *what?*" Jenny probed.

"It's sort of a promotional thing," Sly answered. "A goodwill concert. A chance to get our music heard. And with the triathlon party gig still open—a way to land it, too!"

"Translation?" Tiffani frowned. "You told them that we'd perform free of charge?"

"You got it," Sly said, shrugging.

Jake frowned as he quietly strummed his guitar. "You know, Winkle, sometimes I wonder whose side you're on. Pretty soon, you're going to have us paying other people to let us perform for them."

"Really," Jenny agreed.

"Maybe we should call off the gig," Matt suggested. "It's not like we don't have enough to do with school and band practice and . . . and our personal lives."

And the dozens of girls you have to squeeze into your busy schedule, Jenny thought, remembering Operation: Date-Till-You-Drop. Matt had missed dinner with his family that night because he'd gotten a last-minute offer to eat pizza at Luigi's with Cathlin O'Brien, a girl Jenny knew from her art class.

"Call off the gig?" Sly was horrified. "And miss

the chance to play at the triathlon? The biggest event of the season?"

"Do you really think this gig will help?" Tony asked.

"Absolutely!" Sly insisted. "Think of it as an audition."

Tiffani was the first to give in. "I guess we could think of it as another band rehearsal."

"Although we'll have to drag all of our equipment over to the club and set it up," Matt pointed out.

"Then again, I can meet you guys there," Tiffani said thoughtfully. "I have to teach a tadpole swimming class." As she thought through her schedule, her face brightened. "Tony will be there, too! We're going to—"

"—check out the end of the triathlon course," Tony interrupted, quickly concocting a lie. It was bad enough that everyone knew he couldn't swim. He didn't want to advertise the fact that he'd be taking lessons right after the sniveling, two-year-old tadpoles!

"I vote that we take the gig," Jake added. "But let's not make this a habit, Winkle."

"Hey, hey!" Sly threw up his hands defensively. "I'm just as concerned about the almighty dollar as you people are!"

"That much is true," Jenny observed. For Sly, money was the main motivator, with girls coming in a close second.

"Okay. So does everyone agree that we take the gig?" Matt looked around the room, and each of the Dreams gave a nod of approval. "So it's a go. Now let's get down to practice. I'm taking Wendy to the movies. Then I've got a date for a moonlight walk on the beach with Sarah."

"Whew!" Sly whistled. "Playing both sides of the street? You sly dog."

"That's not it." Matt shook his head and smiled as if he couldn't believe his own good luck. "I don't know what's changed, but suddenly the girls at school have noticed me. It's like I'm the flavor of the month. The stud-muffin of the hour."

"You make a manager proud," Sly said, patting Matt on the back. "Just go with the flow, bud."

"I hope that whatever you've got is contagious," Tony told Matt. "Send some my way, and maybe Neena will see me as more than a fast-talking table-waiting landlubber."

"I hate to cut in on your social lives," Jenny said sarcastically. "But can we get back to practice?"

"Yeah," Jake agreed. "Enough of the soap opera. Let's go over 'This Time' again."

"Let's do it!" Matt shouted, counting off the song. "One . . . two . . . three . . ."

The next day, when Tony came out of the guys' locker room at the Sunnyvale Country Club, Tiffani

had to cover her mouth to hide her smile. "I think that's overkill," she told him.

Bright red, inflatable water wings ringed Tony's upper arms. An orange life vest was strapped over his chest, and a black tire tube was slung around his waist. Combined with his baggy green-and-blue polka-dot swim trunks and the yellow clip that pinched his nose closed, Tony looked like he was auditioning for the clown act at the circus.

"You can't be too safe," Tony said, his voice a high-pitched, nasal drone.

"Relax, Tony," Tiffani insisted, taking his hand. "Water safety is our top priority. Now, you'd better start by losing the nose clip. In lesson number one, we practice holding our breath and blowing air out the nose."

"That's a relief." Tony pulled off the clip and rubbed his nose. "I was beginning to feel like Big Bird with a cold."

"And take off the life vest," she said, unbuckling one of the straps under his chin. "You need to be able to move freely in the water, and that thing will have you hobbling like an apple at Halloween."

"I feel safer with it on," Tony objected.

Tiffani put her hands on her hips. This was going to be harder than she'd expected. "There's nothing to be afraid of," she said firmly. She pointed to the wading pool, where a handful of toddlers

splashed around in the water. "The pool we're starting in is only two feet deep."

"Well . . ." Tony hesitated as he toyed with the buckles on the life vest. The kiddie pool looked like a big bathtub. "I guess I can handle that," he said, shedding the vest and the large tire tube.

"Great start!" Tiffani said, motioning him over to the wading pool.

Together they sat at the edge of the pool. With their feet in the pool, the clear water lapped at their knees.

This isn't so bad, Tony thought, leaning back on his elbows. Sparkling sunshine. Blue skies. Cool water.

"Let's start with a breathing exercise," Tiffani slipped down until she was sitting on the bottom of the pool, the water lapping at her chest. "We're going to blow bubbles! Take a deep breath, hold it in, put your face underwater, and blow the air out through your mouth."

She took a breath of air and then leaned down into the water to demonstrate. Bubbles rose to the surface around her head. Then she sat up, her smiling face glistening wet. "See? It's a piece of cake. Now you try it."

As Tony slipped into the water, he noticed that the three little kids in the pool were watching them.

"Why're the big kids in our pool?" one little girl asked her mother.

Although Tony couldn't hear the lady's answer, he felt like a big klutz as he took a deep breath and started blowing bubbles in the water.

"Good job!" Tiffani cheered when he sat up. "I can tell you're going to be a fast learner."

"Rub-a-dub-dub," Tony said without enthusiasm. "I feel like one of the three old men in the tub. When do we graduate to the *real* pool?"

"Soon," Tiffani promised. "Remember, safety first."

"I can't believe I'm embarrassing myself this way just to land a date with a girl," Tony complained. "How come the girls are swarming around Matt—and he hasn't set foot on the beach for weeks?"

"That's . . . uh . . . different," Tiffani said haltingly. Little pangs of guilt stabbed at her conscience. The more she thought about Operation: Date-Till-You-Drop, the more it bugged her. It was underhanded and sneaky. And at the moment, she wanted to spill the truth to Tony.

"What's so different about Matt?" Tony asked sincerely. "Let me in on the big secret—please, please, please—and I swear I'll be your friend forever."

Tiffani was tempted. But if she revealed the plan, she'd be ratting on all the other girls at Pacific Coast High. "Oh, you know," she said evasively. "Matt is Matt. You just have to be yourself, Tony."

Tony frowned. "And at the moment, this sorry

self has got to learn to swim. That's the only way I'll land a date with Neena."

"But this is more important than all that," Tiffani said fervently. "Water safety is forever. If you learn to swim now, it's a skill that will stay with you for the rest of your life! You'll have more fun at pool parties. You'll be able to run in the surf. You'll know how to . . ."

As Tiffani chattered on, Tony was distracted by a dark form underneath the water. It was big and fleshy . . . and it was headed right toward him!

His mouth dropped open as the object bumped into his thigh and then thrashed out of the water. It was just one of those pesky little kids.

The freckled-faced boy stared up at Tony and then shot a mouthful of water right at him. "Peekaboo!" the kid said, giggling.

"Get lost, you little pip-squeak shark bait . . .," Tony muttered, snarling at the kid.

The boy just giggled and meandered away like a contented crocodile.

"Gross," Tiffani said sympathetically.

Tony rolled his eyes. "The things we do for love."

Tiffani and Tony were waiting in the reception area, psyched and ready to perform, by the time the rest of the gang showed up at the Sunnyvale Country Club.

There was just one snag.

"I'm sorry," said the receptionist, a tall guy with sunny blond hair and a fake smile wide enough for a toothpaste commercial. "But there's just no record of any event on today's calendar." He flipped through the date book, shaking his head. "Nope. Nothing until the triathlon on Saturday."

Alarm began to register on the faces of the band members, but Sly waved his arm and coolly strolled up to the desk.

"I'll take care of this," he insisted. He shook hands with the receptionist. "Sly Winkle's the name. Management's the game. I'm sure if you call your superior, you'll find that the Dreams are booked for the twilight-hour concert. Beginning at six. And you don't want to be the one who keeps all those twilighters waiting, do you . . . ?" Sly snapped his fingers. "What's your name?"

"Mickey," the receptionist answered, his face becoming a little tight with nervousness. "Let me just check in the main office."

"You do that," Sly said, grinning as the guy disappeared down the hall. "In the meantime, I'll call my contact, Mrs. Troutbeck."

As Sly made a call from the lobby pay phone, the Dreams paced the reception area nervously.

"Something doesn't feel right about this," Matt said. "If there's a party here at the club, where are all the people?"

"The parking lot was empty when we came in," Jake observed.

"And there weren't many adults in the pool area," added Tiffani. "Maybe we have the wrong day."

"Maybe the Dreams are booked to play here tomorrow night," Jake said. As he spoke, he heard someone coming down the hall behind him. Expecting to see the receptionist, he wheeled around and came face-to-face with Grant White, the country club cupcake who had dated Jenny.

The cocky smirk on the guy's face made Jake's blood boil.

"Hi, Grant," Jenny said quietly.

"Jennifer." With a saucy grin, Grant cocked an eyebrow. "What's this I hear about California Dreams playing here?" He checked out Jake's leather jacket and boots, adding, "Or is it California Nightmares?"

"Someone booked us for a gig here," Matt explained.

"Excuse me?" Grant blinked in disbelief. "I don't think so. Sunnyvale books *professionals*," he said, eyeing the band. "This isn't the school talent show, you know."

"We're serious musicians," Jenny said defensively.

"Sure you are, babe." Grant touched her cheek and then saluted them all with his tennis racket. "And I'm a serious tennis player. A regular Andre

Agassi. See you at Wimbledon!" He laughed as he headed out the door.

"You'd better make a quick getaway, you boys," Jake muttered at Grant. Jake's hands were curled into fists, and he had to struggle to keep himself from popping the guy right on his perfect nose. How dare he talk to Jenny that way!

"Ooh, that guy makes me mad," Tiffani said, steaming.

"I don't know what you ever saw in him," Matt told Jenny.

Jenny was about to defend herself when Sly slammed down the phone and joined the group. His face was pink with frustration. Not a good sign.

"I have good news, and I have bad news," Sly said solemnly.

"Cut the theatrics, Sylvester," Tony snapped. "Will you just spit it out?"

Sly took a deep breath and then announced, "The good news is, we still have a gig tonight. And we'd better get going if we want to make it on time."

The gang seemed to perk up.

"Neat-o!" Tiffani chirped.

"I like it . . . so far," Matt agreed.

"The bad news is that the gig isn't here at the club," Sly added, checking his watch. "We're supposed to be performing for the twilight-hour concert at the Sunnyvale Retirement Home."

Chapter 6

Like sharks closing in on their prey, the Dreams circled Sly.

"Please tell us you're kidding," Matt said.

"I wish I were," Sly muttered.

"Way to go, Winkle," Jake said, shaking his head in disgust.

"What kind of a manager books a gig in a retirement home?" Tony protested. "Next thing you know, you'll have us performing at f-f-funerals!"

"And it's all for free," Jenny pointed out.

"Okay, okay," Sly said defensively. "So I screwed up. If I'd known the audience was going to be a bunch of grannies in rocking chairs, I'd have turned down the offer. But wait—," he said with a wicked smile. "It's not too late. We can just blow off

the gig and head over to Sharkey's for a couple of shakes."

"Sly . . ." Jenny couldn't believe what he was suggesting. "Have you no conscience?"

"We can't back out now," Tiffani said indignantly. "How would you feel if your grandmother was waiting all day for the twilight concert to begin . . . and it never happened because the band didn't show up?"

"The girls are right," Jake agreed. "We've got to go through with the gig. And if we don't head out soon, we're going to be really late."

"Let's move it," Matt said, turning toward the door.

The band left.

Sly trailed behind them, muttering, "What a bunch of goody-goodies."

Fortunately, the Sunnyvale Retirement Home wasn't too far from the country club. It took the managers only ten minutes to make the drive up the road that curved along the hillside covered with tall, dry grass.

When they reached a wide, flat landing, Jenny caught sight of the home. It was an old, stately, one-story mansion built in the style of a Spanish hacienda. Flanked by two groves of shady palm trees, the one-story building was perched on the hillside like a conquistador's castle. Sunlight gleamed on the

graceful arched windows, and the white stucco walls of the building sparkled as if they were coated with sugar.

"It looks like a cheerful place," Tiffani said.

Matt turned the station wagon into the circular drive in front of the mansion.

"Let's just hope they're not ticked off that we're late," Jake said as he popped open the door and stepped out of the car.

But the receptionist who greeted them at the door wasn't worried about the time. "I'm just happy you made it!" she said as she ushered them down the hall to the room where the twilight concert would be held. "It would have been such a pity to disappoint the residents. They really look forward to this event."

"Welcome to Sunnyvale!" an elderly woman gushed as the kids looked over the rec room where they were supposed to be playing. "I'm Iris McDimple, one of the residents here," she said merrily, giving Sly a playful nudge.

As the guys checked out the facilities, Jenny and Tiffani turned to the friendly woman.

"We're California Dreams," Tiffani explained.

"The rock band," Jenny added.

"A band!" Mrs. McDimple clapped her pudgy hands together. "Oh, Mausie, you were right!" she called to someone sitting in a group by the window. "We are going to hear live music."

Jenny decided that Mrs. McDimple's name suited her. She was a feisty dimpling of a woman. A dimpled smile seemed to be permanently fixed on her round face.

The rec room was a large room with wooden floors and a wall of windows. The place was sparsely furnished with rows of folding chairs, which were filling up with murmuring residents.

"We can set up our amps in that corner by the mirrored wall," Tony said, scouting out the place. "Looks like there are plenty of outlets."

"We'd better speed it up," Jenny said, eyeing the crowd of elderly people who were filing in the door. "Our audience is assembling."

"You mean the guys had better speed it up," Matt said, goading his sister. "We're the ones who always do the dirty work."

"Not today," Jenny insisted, darting toward the rec room door. "Last one to the station wagon is a rotten egg!" she called, and then took off running.

"I'm right behind you!" Tiffani shouted, following on her best friend's heels.

Their sneakers squeaked against the linoleum floor as they raced down the hall, narrowly avoiding a man in a wheelchair who popped out of a doorway.

"Whoa," Jenny said aloud, suddenly remembering where she was. "Guess we'd better take it easy." She didn't want to mow down some unsuspecting Sunnyvale resident.

By the time the girls reached the Garrisons' station wagon, which was parked outside the home's service entrance, they were out of breath but exhilarated.

"We'll show them!" Jenny brushed back her reddish brown bangs and then tugged open the car's tailgate. "Let's pick out the biggest, bulkiest piece of equipment and lug it in, right under their noses."

"Great idea," Tiffani said. She pushed the coils of electrical cord aside. Then she pulled out two of the guitar cases and propped them against the side of the car. "We'll leave this lightweight stuff for the girhe-men," she said, giggling.

They found the perfect object in the center of the car. It was big. It was heavy. In fact, it was almost as big as Jenny herself.

"This amp should do the trick," Tiffani said, leaning forward to slide it out.

"Let me help you," Jenny offered. She had to climb into the car and get behind the big black box to get enough leverage to push the thing out. At last, the girls had the amplifier perched on the tailgate.

"Leave that amp for us," Tony called to them from the edge of the parking lot. The guys had taken their good old time getting out to the car. "It's too heavy."

"Don't be silly," Jenny insisted. "We can manage."

"I'm beginning to have my doubts," Tiffani whispered so that the guys couldn't hear. "This thing weighs a ton."

"It's all in your mind-set. Don't be intimidated," Jenny told her, sliding the amp to the edge of the tailgate. "On the count of three, we'll each grab one side and lift. We can carry it as far as the door, and then take a break and rest it on the ground for a minute. Ready?"

Tiffani tucked a wisp of golden hair behind one ear and then planted her feet firmly on the ground. "As ready as I'll ever be."

"One . . ." Jenny counted. "Two . . . three . . ."

With a grunt and a groan, the girls grasped the amp and dragged it off the tailgate.

"I don't know about your mind-set," Tiffani muttered to her friend. "But right now, mine is beginning to ache—just like my arms."

"We can rest at the door," Jenny said through gritted teeth. It was hard to believe that a simple black box could be so heavy, but Jenny couldn't ignore the tremendous strain on her back and the bloodless look of her white knuckles. And it didn't help that they had to walk sideways, since they held the amp against their chests.

The whole thing was an awkward, wobbly process.

A process that was making the guys very nervous.

"Would you just stick to the light stuff and let the guys handle that?" Sly snapped.

"Watch that curb!" Jake warned.

"Careful!" Tony added.

"You'll have to angle it through the door," Matt called, jogging toward them to lend a hand.

"We've got it under control," Jenny muttered, annoyed at the commotion. The guys had absolutely no confidence in them at all.

Meanwhile, Tiffani was squinting and squirming.

"Easy, Tif," Jenny coached her. "We're almost at the door."

"That's . . . not . . . the problem . . .," Tiffani said between concentrated breaths. She wrinkled her nose and jerked her head back. A strange expression contorted her usually pretty face.

"Are you okay?" Jenny asked her friend.

"Going . . . to . . . sneeze . . .," Tiffani answered.

Before Jenny had a moment to react, Tiffani's head jerked forward in an earth-shaking sneeze. "Ah-choo!" she cried, suddenly losing her grip.

The total weight of the amplifier was too much for Jenny. The heavy black box slipped through her hands and fell to the ground, landing on her right foot with an incredible *thud!*

Chapter 7

Yee-oooo!" Jenny howled, yanking her foot out from under the weight and grabbing her toes. Blinded by pain, she hopped around for a second until Tiffani grabbed her by the shoulders and held her still.

"Jen . . . I'm so sorry! Are you okay?" Tiffani asked frantically.

"I'll be okay," Jenny choked out, "if my foot ~~ever~~ stops throbbing."

"Oh, how awful!" Tiffani lamented. "I should have said something. I was holding on tight, but it just slipped when—"

"Do you think you broke any bones?" Jake asked, touching Jenny's arm gently.

The concern in his dark eyes made Jenny want to cry. And since she was in such pain, she could

"And what's that?" Jenny asked, trying to ignore the fluttery feeling in her stomach.

"It starts with an expert back rub," he said, covering her shoulders with his warm, wide hands.

"Mmm," Jenny sighed as her aches seemed to dissolve under Jake's fingertips. "That feels great." It felt so good to be close to him. Her heart was beating faster, but she tried to ignore it, to block it out and just concentrate on the warmth of Jake's touch.

Jenny let her head roll forward as Jake massaged her shoulders. The garage was still and quiet, but as far as Jenny was concerned, they might as well have been on a secluded island.

"I can see that it's working already," Jake whispered into her ear. "Pretty soon you'll be ready for the second part of the treatment."

"And what's that?" she asked.

When he didn't answer right away, she turned toward him, having forgotten just how close he was sitting. Suddenly, his handsome face was just inches away, his dark eyes looking into hers, his breath warm on her cheek . . . his lips moving toward hers.

He was going to kiss her.

Jake's eyes were nearly shut as he leaned forward. His hands cradled her face; he tilted his head and kissed her.

Fireworks!

Suddenly, it was like the Fourth of July. Explosive. Loud. Blinding. Brilliant.

Jenny closed her eyes and tried to make the moment last. This was where she belonged . . . in Jake's arms. Kissing him. Feeling the muscles of his arms move under her hands.

Tenderly, he stroked her cheek and then leaned back. "This is intense," he whispered, staring into her eyes.

"Very intense," she agreed.

"I've been wanting to kiss you for a long time, but . . ." His voice trailed off as he looked away and shrugged. "I wasn't sure how you felt."

Jenny frowned. "I'm not always good at expressing my feelings."

With a smile, Jake touched her cheek again. "I think you're doing just fine." He leaned back on the couch and pulled her feet onto his lap. "How's that sore toe doing?" he asked, massaging her ankles.

"Oooh! That tickles!" Jenny said, giggling. "I think it's going to be okay. But I'm afraid you're going to see me limping around for the next few days."

"Too bad," Jake said sympathetically. "Guess that mixes the triathlon for you."

"What do you mean?" Jenny pulled her legs out of Jake's lap and let her feet drop to the floor.

"You can't ride in a race with an injury like that," Jake told her. When the soft glaze in Jenny's dark eyes hardened into a cold stare, Jake knew he'd said the wrong thing. "I mean . . ." He struggled to

save the moment. "It would really hurt to ride with a sore foot."

"You don't think I can do it, do you?" She put her hands on her hips, as if ready to square off.

"I didn't mean it that way," he said defensively. "You know I'd never stand in the way of the Feminine Faction. I'd like to see you girls win and show some of the hotshot jocks around here a thing or two. It's just that . . . I'd hate to see you get hurt."

"Translation?" Jenny jumped to her feet, wincing as her sore toe throbbed in pain. "You think I'm a wimp. A wuss. A total pansy. You don't believe I can take care of myself out there."

Jake shook his head. "I never said that—"

"But you were thinking it." Jenny limped away from him and then turned toward the door to the house. The magic moment was ruined, spoiled by the cold, harsh reality that Jake thought she was a wimp.

"Wait a minute, Jen. You're reading into things."

"Just cutting through to the facts," Jenny insisted. "You think I'm a helpless, namby-pamby girl."

"That's not true!" Jake insisted.

"Well, come Saturday, I'm going to prove you wrong," Jenny said with conviction. "I'm riding in that race—and finishing the hike event—if it's the last thing I ever do!"

Chapter 8

"I don't know what to do," Jenny put her head on the table and groaned.

"Keep it down," Tiffani shushed her, checking over her shoulder for the library police.

Mrs. Oppenheimer ran a tight ship. That meant you had to keep your voice down to a whisper in the library of Pacific Coast High. The girls had ten minutes until Friday morning classes began . . . just ten minutes for Tiffani to get the details on what had happened last night between Jenny and Jake. Unfortunately, Tiffani wasn't having much success.

"Okay," Tiffani squeezed her friend's arm encouragingly. "Let's start again. You unloaded the car. You sat on the couch. He sat down beside you and—"

"And it was one of the most romantic moments

of my life," Jenny said, thinking back. She gave Tiffani a quick recap of the sweet, romantic highlights . . . and the sour low points.

"Too bad the night had to end that way," Tiffani said, wrinkling her nose. "So what do you think will happen between the two of you? Do you still like him—even if he treats you like a namby-pamby girl?"

"Oh, Tif." Jenny raked her reddish brown bangs off her forehead and scrunched them between her fingers. "The truth is, Jake Sommers turns me into oatmeal."

Confused, Tiffani frowned. "Oatmeal as in brown-sugar-and-cinnamon-yum-yum?" she asked. "Or oatmeal as in I'd-rather-have-eggs-and-toast?"

"I'm not sure," Jenny admitted. "This amazingly wonderful magic swept over me when Jake kissed me. But with all the talk about women's lib and power and freedom, I wonder if I should let myself get so close to him. I mean, I melted in his arms, but somehow I feel like I'm betraying the cause—the Feminine Faction."

"Sounds like oatmeal-yum-yum." Tiffani smiled. "Triple yum! With cream and jam."

"It's not that simple," Jenny insisted.

"I know, Jen. And I can't really give you any advice. You have to do what's right for you." Tiffani sighed and then reached to the center of the table

and pulled a copy of the school paper from the stack of new editions. "Let's see what's hopping here at PC High."

While Jenny stared off into space, tossing around her dilemma, Tiffani gave her the school news highlights.

"Our twirling squad came in second in the county finals," she reported. "They're going to resurface the tennis courts next year. The filing deadline for the S.A.T.s is next month. And . . ." She gasped. "I can't believe it!"

"What?" Snapped out of her trance, Jenny leaned forward to read over her friend's shoulder.

"Here's something that's sure to churn up your oatmeal. There's a letter to the editor from the Feminine Faction," Tiffani said, pointing to the column.

"That's impossible. We're the Feminine Faction, and we didn't write to the school newspaper."

"Well, someone did. And it's right here in black and white."

Jenny quickly skimmed the letter and groaned. "A list of demands for the girls of Pacific Coast High? Why didn't anyone ask us about this?"

"And the demands . . ." Tiffani shook her head in disbelief. "Some of them are reasonable. But some of the others are kind of silly."

Jenny read a few of the demands aloud

"Football and soccer teams for girls. Half of the teachers must be female. A school holiday on Susan B. Anthony's birthday . . ."

"Yikes!" Tiffani winced. "I don't agree with all this stuff. But now whenever people think of the Feminine Faction, they're going to remember this stupid list."

"No one will take our cause seriously anymore," Jenny bit her lip. "This is disastrous."

"When we came up with the campaign in civics class, I just wanted people to cheer us on at the triathlon," Tiffani admitted.

"And, among other things, I wanted an essay A from Ms. Canton," added Jenny. "But what kind of grade is she going to give us once she reads this letter in the school paper? Someone stepped out of line and screwed up our strategy."

"What are we going to do?" Tiffani asked.

"We'd better see if we can find Neena and the other girls. We've got to put the brakes on this campaign. The Feminine Faction has taken on a life of its own."

"It's like one of those creepy horror movies," Tiffani muttered as she pointed to the editorial, with an exaggerated grimace of fear. "Look, Dr. Frankenstein . . . we've created a monster!"

It wasn't hard to find the key players of the Feminine Faction campaign. They had taken over the school lobby with posters, banners, and solicitors.

"Hey, Jen! How do you like our new banner?" Neena called. She was holding up one end of a six-foot roll of paper, while Sarah Feinberg and three other girls placed masking tape along the edges.

The banner was bright and bold: SUPPORT THE FEMININE FACTION!

"I guess that says it all," Jenny admitted, "but have you seen the letter to the editor in today's paper?"

"The list of demands?" Tiffani clarified.

"Isn't it great?" Neena asked, nodding vigorously.

Jenny tried to be diplomatic. "Well, to be honest, we have some—"

"I can't take the credit," Neena admitted. "It was Sarah's idea, and Alexis wrote the letter."

"But why didn't you guys include us?" Tiffani asked.

"Tiffani and I don't agree with all the demands," Jenny pointed out. "In fact, we have some problems with them. Don't our opinions matter?"

"We called your house last night," Sarah said defensively, "but your mom said you were playing a gag at the country club."

"And we didn't want to delay," Randi Jo added. "After all, the triathlon is tomorrow."

"That list makes me . . . very uncomfortable," Jenny said firmly.

"Talk to Alexis," Neena said. "She's the one

who drafted it." She pointed to the group of girls who were stopping students at the door and handing them flyers.

Alexis buzzed around with a clipboard, grabbing passersby and laying a fast sales pitch on them. Not a fan of the hard sell, Jenny approached her tentatively.

"Alexis . . ."

"Hey, Jen," Alexis spoke rapidly. "No time to talk. I'm getting signatures. I turned our list of demands into a petition, and before the day is over, I want to have the signature of every student in this school!"

"Wait a second, Alexis," Jenny insisted. "Those demands don't really represent every girl's beliefs."

"Let's not split hairs over this." Alexis shrugged. "It's the whole war that counts, Jen. Not the little battles."

"But I don't think—"

"Excuse me," Alexis said, cutting Jenny off for the second time. "But I see some guys from the wrestling team over there, and I want to get their signatures before they get away!"

Jenny felt her temper rising as Alexis darted off after a bunch of brawny guys. She and Alexis were on the same side. Somehow, though, Alexis's answers seemed condescending. She didn't care what Jenny

thought. She didn't care if anyone disagreed with the list of demands. She had an agenda of her own.

And it didn't match the goals Jenny and Tiffani had dreamed up in civics class.

"How'd it go?" Tiffani asked, joining Jenny.

"It didn't," Jenny muttered. "She didn't really hear a word I said. She's so high on the attention she's getting from the campaign that she's lost track of the real issues."

"This thing is getting way out of control," Tiffani said.

Jenny nodded. "And I don't think we can stop it."

By the time the first bell rang, Jenny and Tiffani had to hurry to their lockers to grab books for their morning classes. But when the girls rounded the corner of the corridor, Jenny's heart sank.

The guys from the Dreams were hanging out in front of Tiffani's locker.

Matt was leaning against a wall, looking utterly comatose with his arms folded and eyes closed. Operation: Date-Till-You-Drop was wearing him down, all right.

Tony was pacing nervously.

Sly was grinning behind an open copy of the school newspaper.

And Jake . . . Jake stood stern and tall, looking as heart-wrenchingly gorgeous as ever.

Oh, Jake, Jenny wanted to cry out. Are we ever going to work out our feelings for each other?

"It's the Fractious Females," Sly called out, winking at the girls. "You left a few things off this list. Maybe we should paint half the school parking lot pink. Oh, and let's not forget the cafeteria food! Every Thursday, they can serve tea and ladyfingers." He belted out a laugh at his own joke.

Much to Jenny's relief, he was laughing alone.

"Sly," Jenny snapped, "why don't you make like a snake and slither away?"

"Now who's getting personal?" He cocked an eyebrow. "Did I hit a nerve? A sensitive area for our little women's libbers?"

"Gave it a rest, Sly," Tiffani said. "Jenny and I had nothing to do with that list of demands."

"Oh, really? The plot thickens," Sly said, snapping open the newspaper to read on.

"Oh, Matt..." Randi Jo came over and gave Matt's arm a squeeze. When he didn't respond, she had to shake him—hard.

"What...? What's going on?" he murmured, still in a daze. His eyes were rimmed with red, and his hair was rumpled as if he'd just rolled out of bed and in the school door.

"Just wanted to remind you that we're having lunch together," Randi Jo said sweetly. She leaned up on tiptoe and tapped his nose affectionately.

"You're a hard guy to steal a quiet moment with these days."

"Don't I know it," Matt muttered.

"See you at lunch?" Randi Jo persisted.

"Can't wait," Matt said, forcing a smile. The minute Randi Jo turned away, his eyes drooped shut and he sank back against the wall.

"My brother, the live wire," Jenny muttered as she fished in her locker for her math book.

Meanwhile, Tony was leaning against the locker beside Tiffani's, waiting for a chance to talk to her without being noticed by the rest of the gang. Sly and the other guys would never let him live it down if they knew he'd been spending his free time splashing around in the kiddie pool. His big round eyes rolled over the other band members suspiciously, until Tiffani couldn't help but giggle at the sight.

"Oh, Tony," she said quietly. "Take a chill pill. Nobody knows what's going on." She glanced back at the other kids and saw that no one was paying them the least bit of attention. "See? Nobody even cares!"

Still on edge, he asked, "So we're on for... today-tay?"

Tiffani nodded. "This afternoon, at the club. And I like the pig latin. I didn't realize you knew a foreign language."

Four lockers away, Jenny shut the steel door

and turned to face the music. Jake had been standing a few feet behind her, waiting silently. It was time for a talk.

She took a deep breath for courage and then turned to face him. "Guess you've got me cornered."

Jake moved closer and buried his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket. "About last night . . ."

"I'm sorry things didn't end on a better note," Jenny said sadly. "But maybe it wasn't meant to be. Maybe we weren't meant to be."

"Hey, don't go jumping to conclusions." He reached out and touched her cheek; then he pulled his hand back, as if the contact burned him. "Look, Jenny. I'd never try to stop you from riding in that race. I'd never try to stop you from doing anything that's important to you."

Jenny sighed. "But if you had your way, you'd keep me out of the race. Protected, like some fragile hothouse orchid."

"I care about you, okay?" Jake's voice was thick with emotion. "Is that so hard to take?"

I care about you, too, Jake! Jenny wanted to shout and throw herself in his arms. Instead, she knew it was important to keep their discussion on track. "That's not the point. Sometimes—"

"Jenny! I've been looking all over for you!" Alexis interrupted. Like a rapid-fire weapon, she chattered so quickly that Jenny was defenseless. "Where did you disappear to? We printed flyers for

you to hand out. And don't forget about the petition. Did everyone here sign it?"

Jenny's heart sank when she saw the annoyance on Jake's face. Talk about bad timing! Just when she and Jake were trying to work things out. "Alexis," Jenny gritted out, "Jake and I were—"

"No time for fun!" Alexis insisted, tugging on Jenny's sleeve. "Sorry, Sommers, but we have important business to take care of. There are still tons of people to talk to. . . ."

"Jake!" Jenny called after him as she pushed Alexis off. But he'd already turned away. "Wait a second. . . ."

Her words were lost in the chaos of a hundred students slamming locker doors and scurrying through the corridors.

And if Jake heard her, he wasn't answering.

Chapter 9

Earth to Jenny!" Tiffani couldn't remember when she'd seen her best friend in such a lousy mood. Dazed. Distracted. Irritable.

"Sorry," Jenny said, maneuvering down the steps of the school. She'd spent the entire day feeling miserable about Jake and wondering what to do about the Feminine Faction. "It's been a rotten day."

"I know," Tiffani said sympathetically.

Jenny hitched her knapsack higher on her shoulder, adding, "I don't know what to do about Jake. But I want to put the brakes on our crazy campaign. Let's go to Neena's house. Maybe if we talk to her alone, she'll understand our side of the story."

"Sounds like a great idea," Tiffani agreed.

"But I can't go. Swim lessons." She felt just as bad as Jenny did about the way the Feminine Faction

campaign was developing, but at the moment, she didn't have time to worry about it. She had to get to the country club to teach a tadpole swimming class. Then there was Tony's lesson.

Jenny shrugged. "So I'll go on my own. See you at band practice!"

"Good luck!" Tiffani called, checking her watch. "I've got to run. If I'm a minute late, the tadpoles start having water fights."

The Holmes family lived in a ranch house tucked into one of the hillsides overlooking the ocean. As Jenny climbed the sandy path leading up from the beach, she realized how perfect the location was for Neena. When the surf was high, Neena could just grab her board and clamber down to catch a few waves.

It was an easy climb, but Jenny was slightly handicapped by her sore toe. She wasn't limping anymore, but she still wasn't ready to dance in a ball. *The triathlon is going to be torture!* She groaned at the thought of the five-mile hike ride in store for her tomorrow afternoon.

As Jenny turned off the sand path onto the asphalt drive, she noticed an unusual number of cars lining the street. Halfway up the hill, the Holmes house was alive with activity. Festive music was drifting along on the sea breeze. Children were running through the yard, playing a game of tag. People were milling around half a dozen tables and chairs

set up in the side yard. A hand-lettered poster in the front window announced: HAPPY BIRTHDAY—90 YEARS!

They were having a birthday party.

Jenny paused at the edge of the driveway. She didn't want to barge into a family celebration. But before she could turn away, a woman on the front lawn called to her.

"Aren't you one of Neena's friends?" asked a slender woman with smooth brown skin and straight black hair.

Jenny nodded. "I wanted to talk with her—but I can come back tomorrow."

"Don't be silly," the woman said, waving Jenny forward. "I'm Neena's mother. I'm sure she'll be happy to see you, and what's one more guest when you're already feeding three dozen?"

Neena's mother ushered Jenny around to the side of the house, where guests milled around tables piled high with food. "Let's see," she said, scanning the crowd. "Last I remember, my daughter was fetching some ice. . . . There she is."

She caught Neena's eye, and the tall, athletic girl wave through the crowd toward Jenny.

"Hey, Jen. What's up?" Neena asked.

"I saw the cars and thought I'd crash the party," Jenny teased.

Neena and her mom laughed. "Well, you came to the right place," Mrs. Holmes said, smiling.

"There's plenty of food, so help yourself. I'm going to refill the cold-cuts platter."

"Can I get you something?" Neena offered. "A soda? Sandwich? Ice cream and cake?"

"No, thanks," Jenny answered. "I wanted to have a talk . . . but it's kind of hard to get serious with all this partying going on. Whose birthday is it?"

"My great-grandmother," Neena explained, looking fondly toward a group of people near the dessert table. "She just turned ninety. Pretty wild, huh?"

Jenny followed her glance and saw that the guest of honor was none other than Maisie Pearl, the woman she'd met at the Sunnyvale Retirement Home. Today she was wearing a canary yellow suit with a black hat trimmed in gold beads. "Your great-grandmother is Maisie Pearl—the singer?"

Neena nodded proudly as the older woman spotted the two teenage girls and joined them.

"Well, if it isn't one of the California Dreams." Maisie patted Jenny's shoulder affectionately. "What is your name again, child?"

"Jenny Garrison."

"Jenny is one of the team members for tomorrow's race," Neena explained to her great-grandmother.

"Really?" Maisie eyed Jenny dubiously. "And such a wisp of a thing. Maybe you should stick to singing, honey."

Why did everyone write Jenny off before the

race had even begun? Did she have *laser* etched on her forehead?

Swallowing her annoyance, Jenny said, "The race is one of the reasons I'm here. I don't know how much Neena has told you, but our team is called the Feminine Faction, and a bunch of girls at school have joined the campaign to support us."

"It's really cool, Maisie," Neena added. "We're trying to get a big crowd of girls to come out and cheer us on tomorrow."

"Is that so?" Maisie leaned on her cane as she listened.

"The only problem is that the campaign has snowballed out of control," Jenny said. "Way out of control. Tiffani and I don't agree with the list of demands that were submitted to the school paper. In fact, we think some of them make the Feminine Faction sound a little foolish."

"The demands *did* get us a lot of attention from kids at school," Neena pointed out.

"But for all the wrong reasons," Jenny argued. "The point of our campaign was to build awareness and fight for equality. But getting Susan B. Anthony's birthday off from school and painting our lockers pink? Demands like that make our entire cause lose credibility."

"Well . . ." Neena's dark eyes were thoughtful as she shoved her hands into the pockets of her denim skirt. "I see your point, Jenny. But there's

no stopping the campaign now. It's got a life of its own."

"That's for sure," Jenny muttered. "It's like the creature that ate Pacific Coast High! The campaign has turned my brother into a zombie. It's caused a rift in our band. It's even come between me and my boyfriend . . . or at least I think he wanted to be my boyfriend *before* this Feminine Faction thing came up."

"You poor child." Maisie blinked curiously. "And you mean to tell me that my great-granddaughter is responsible for all this turmoil?"

"Not really," Jenny admitted. "Actually, my friend Tiffani and I started it."

Maisie pointed her cane at a circle of vacant chairs. "Let's sit down and you can tell me the whole story. This is a heck of a lot more interesting than listening to your Aunt Melody drone on about those monstrous children of hers."

"Maisie . . ." Neena giggled as she helped the old woman to a chair. "They *are* your great-grandchildren."

"But they're rascals," Maisie said bluntly. She smoothed her yellow skirt over her knees and then leaned back. "Now . . . tell me everything."

Jenny and Neena filled her in on the details of the whole campaign. Jenny mentioned that the campaign had begun as an assignment in Ms. Canton's civics class. They talked about all the girls who'd

gotten involved in the campaign. And Neena explained how the triathlon would be run.

"Sounds to me like you girls opened up a can of worms," Maisie said, chuckling. "And you're going to have a hard time convincing those critters to crawl back inside."

"Why don't we just let the campaign run its course?" Neena suggested. "Things should die down after the triathlon tomorrow."

"I guess we don't have much choice," Jenny said, feeling defeated. "I just hope that we can prove something tomorrow. I want to show that girls have the power and strength to compete with guys."

"Is that *really* what you're aiming to prove, child?" Maisie pointed her cane at Jenny, adding, "What's going to happen if you lose? Does that mean you're powerless?"

Jenny frowned. "No, of course not." But she could see where Maisie was leading. Just what was Jenny trying to prove by competing in the triathlon?

"I think you're a bit confused, Jenny," Maisie said, shaking her head. "You're confusing equality and freedom and power and love. They're all different things, not a big mixing pot."

"I just want to do my best in the race," Neena said firmly.

"Then go out there and do it, child," Maisie said, squeezing Neena's arm. "What about you, Jenny? What do you want out of this whole thing?"

Jenny closed her eyes and concentrated. What did she want? She looked over at Maisie and Neena, and then answered, "I want to prove to the guys—to everyone—that women are as strong as men."

"By running a race?" Maisie blinked in surprise. "Hooey, you're going about this the wrong way. You've got strength—and plenty of it. But real strength has nothing to do with whether you can run faster than a man. Real strength is inside you, deep inside."

Confused, Jenny brushed her bangs off her forehead. "But entering the race is the only way I know how to show my strength."

"No, child," Maisie shook her head. "Sing me a few bars of one of your songs."

Jenny took a deep breath and then belted out the refrain of "This Time."

"There you go," Maisie said smugly. She folded her hands over the pearl handle of her cane as if she'd just solved a mystery. "Deep down inside, you've got the strength of steel, and no one can take that away from you. No matter what storm clouds and battles are brewing around you, you'll always have strength in your soul."

Maisie's words lingered in Jenny's mind long after the older woman had moved off to get a cup of tea. "Well," Jenny said, "that sure gives me something to think about."

Neena smiled. "Maisie can be cryptic. But her advice is pretty good—if you can figure it out."

"She's a great lady."

"So what do you think?" Neena asked Jenny.

"Will the Feminine Faction be racing tomorrow?"

"Definitely," Jenny said. "In the meantime, I've got a few things to sort out." The Feminine Faction campaign was out of Jenny's control at school. But at home, and among her friends, she could make her views clear. And it was time to straighten a few things out.

"Nice job!" Tiffani said as she tossed a dry towel to Tony. They were standing at the edge of the pool in front of the partition leading to the locker rooms.

"I've never seen anyone shed a water phobia so fast," Tiffani told him. "You can hold your own in the water now, Tony. That's a big achievement!"

"I had fantastic motivation." Tony dried his legs and then slung the towel over his shoulders. "And a great teacher. Thanks, Tif."

"No problem," she said, wiping droplets of water from her face. "We'll keep your lessons going until you can swim enough to do four laps in the pool. That's what every kid needs to get an A badge here at the club."

"I sure hope Neena falls prey to the Wicks charm after I've gone to all this trouble."

"I'm sure she will," Tiffani said, playfully nudging his arm.

Just then, they heard voices coming from the

guys' locker room. Tiffani ignored them . . . until she heard someone mention the triathlon.

"Who's that?" she whispered, grabbing Tony's arm. "He's talking about the race. Could be one of our competitors."

"... we're definitely going to win," the male said.

"That's Grant White," Tony whispered to Tiffani. "I'd know that cocky-wussy-nasal voice anywhere."

"You sound pretty sure of yourself," another guy said. "You guys must have spent a lot of time training."

"Not," Grant said, chuckling. "We're going to win by knocking out the competition."

"Did you hear that?" With a gasp, Tiffani grabbed Tony's arm. "They're going to cheat!"

"Shh. Let's get out of sight before they come out here." Tony pulled her away from the locker-room dock, and they ducked behind a row of potted palm trees—just as Grant and the other guy walked out to the poolside deck.

Peering through a palm frond, Tiffani recognized Grant's friend. It was Devon Crafeld, one of the guys in her math class.

"Seriously? You're going to knock off the other teams?" Devon asked Grant.

"Nothing too drastic," Grant said smugly. "We don't want to leave any evidence behind. Let's just say we're going to let the air out of their tires. . . ."

Chapter 10

Cheating!" That night at band practice, Sly was horrified to hear about Grant's plan. "The oldest trick in the book. Why didn't I think of that?"

Tiffani and Tony had just revealed the news in the privacy of the Garnisons' garage. Tension filled the room as each of the Dreams reacted with alarm.

Everyone, that is, except Matt.

He was curled up in the Garnisons' old beanbag chair, napping. So far, Operation: Date-Till-You-Drop was a huge success. Matt's last four days and nights had been filled with a variety of dates with all kinds of girls. And he was ready to drop—literally.

As Matt snored quietly, the rest of the band mulled over Grant's plot.

"This is no joke, Sylvester," Tony said, wagging a finger at the band manager. "You don't have to

The Dream Team

worry because you're not participating in the race. However, as a member of the Dream Team, let me be the first to say that I'd like to finish the triathlon with my arms and legs unbroken."

Jenny frowned. "You don't think Grant would be so sick as to actually hurt the other competitors, do you?"

But the grim looks on Tony's and Tiffani's faces were not encouraging.

"He bragged that he was going to knock out the competition," Tiffani said, trying to recall exactly what Grant had said. "And he mentioned something about letting the air out of our tires."

"That would be the bike competition," Jake said, glancing over at Jenny. "That's us, kid."

She nodded. "But now that we've been tipped off, we can arm ourselves. Let's work together on this. We'll carry an air pump . . . and Sly can be standing by with a spare bike in case one of us needs it."

"Oh, no," Sly said, waving off the plan. "I can't spend the afternoon standing in the hot sun guarding a bicycle. I have other fish to fry."

"Like scoping out the schools of guppy girls waiting at the club?" Tony probed. "Come on, Sylvester. You got us into this bust-your-buns race. The least you can do is help save our skins."

"All right, all right," Sly said. "I'll support the Dream Team. But why should I help the Merculous Ferns?"

"Because you care about Jenny and me," Tiffani said sincerely.

"Because underneath that shiny exterior beats a human heart," Jenny said. "Though I often find it hard to believe."

"Because I'll turn you into mincemeat if you let anything bad happen to Jenny and Tif," Jake warned.

"Some pretty convincing arguments," Sly said, edging away from Jake's fierce stare. "Okay. You win. I'll do it. But let me remind you that I wanted us to get into this race to publicize the band. Not to support an army of women's libbers. I do have my standards."

Jenny rolled her eyes. "Even if they are low standards."

Tiffani unstrapped her electric bass and rested it in its case. Before they started practicing, there was one other thing she wanted to clear up, but she wasn't sure how Jenny felt about it. "Since we're working together now," Tiffani said, nervously twirling her long blond hair between her fingers, "there's something else we should clear up." She gave Jenny a pleading look.

"I've been hit with the guilts, too," Jenny admitted. "We have to come clean."

"The Feminine Faction has also been cheating a little," Tiffani admitted, her green eyes wide with guilt.

"What?" Sly couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Oh, that's great. Is the Dream Team the only team that's been playing this one straight? I should have come up with a crafty, conniving plan as soon as we entered the triathlon."

Ignoring him, Jenny continued. "It's called Operation: Date-Till-You-Drop," she explained. "And Matt was our target."

"Huh? What?" Matt asked, stirring at the mention of his name. He rubbed his bleary eyes and stretched his long legs. "I'm ready to rehearse," he said. "Just give me one more minute to rest my eyes. . . ."

"Better wake up," Jenny said, gently shaking his shoulder. "You need to hear this."

"Yeah, okay." With a yawn, Matt pushed himself out of the chair and faced the rest of the band. "What's the problem?"

"You," Tony answered. "You've been the victim of a cruel, calculating hoax perpetrated by a bevy of beauties from Pacific Coast High."

"We should all be so lucky," Sly muttered.

Tiffani went over to Matt and took his hand. She wanted to break the truth gently. "You know all those girls who've been calling you? All those dates you've been getting the past few days?" she asked, looking up at him. When he nodded, she continued. "They've been asking you out just to keep you busy."

Matt shrugged, still not catching on. "Well, it worked."

"Listen, Matt," Jenny said firmly. Her older brother wasn't usually so dense, but the lack of sleep had temporarily fried his brain. "The girls of the Feminine Faction wanted to wear you down so that you'd be too tired to do well in tomorrow's race. That's why you've had dates scheduled for morning, noon, and night."

"That was a lousy trick," Jake said. His stern expression made Tiffani look away. Jenny stared right back at him, willing to take the blame. She wanted to clear things up with Jake, and she hoped that coming clean on this scam would be a step in the right direction.

"I can't believe the girls' team could stoop so low," Tony said indignantly. "And I wish they'd chosen me as a target."

"The Feminine Faction?" Matt scratched his head as the whole thing began to sink in. "You mean, none of those girls asked me out because they wanted to be with me? Not even Randi Jo?"

"You were used, bud," Jake said bluntly.

"I'm so sorry, Matt." Gently, Tiffani squeezed his hand. "You must feel just awful."

"Well . . ." Matt paused to consider the situation. "Not really. I mean, it's been a lot of fun."

"But the plan succeeded," Jenny said. "You're completely worn down. So you can just cancel the

dates you have between tonight and the time of the race."

"Get some rest," Tiffani advised. "And you'll be able to swim your best."

"Let's not rush into anything," Matt said as he eased back down into the beanbag chair. "Why should I cancel on some of the cutest girls at school? Seems to me, if I've got less than twenty-four hours of this dating marathon left, I might as well make the most of it."

"A man after my own heart," Sly said, patting Matt's shoulder. "Though you could pass one or two of those lovely ladies on to your old friend Sly."

"No way," Matt said, folding his arms. "I'm going to enjoy my last hours in dating paradise." He yawned again. "Though I could use a few hours of sleep. Maybe I'll cancel the sunrise breakfast with Mellory and go straight to brunch with Nathan. . . ."

Just then, the door to the house opened and Mrs. Garrison poked her head out. "Sly, there's a woman on the phone—a Mrs. Tartikoff? She says you told her to contact you here."

"This could be the call I've been waiting for!" Sly dashed across the garage and bounded up the steps.

"Since when did you start having your calls transferred here?" Mrs. Garrison asked as she held the door open for him.

Sly smiled sweetly. "I knew you wouldn't mind, Mrs. G."

Jenny watched as Sly and her mother disappeared inside. Then she turned back to the others. "Are we going to practice—or just play true confessions all night?"

"Let's do it!" Matt said, struggling to get out of the comfortable chair.

Quickly, the band tuned up their instruments. Jenny warmed up her fingers with a few lightning-fast exercises on the synthesizer keyboard. Then the band decided to rehearse a song that Jake and Matt had written together. It was one of Jenny's favorites because Jake had thought up the lyrics, and she had a feeling that they'd come straight from his heart.

"The moment we said good-bye, I felt something in me die. . . ." As Matt sang the opening lyrics, Jenny hit a few chords and looked over at Jake.

He had the darkest, most intense brown eyes she'd ever seen. And he was watching her, searching her face, looking for a hint of what she was feeling.

I'm sorry we've been having so much trouble connecting! Jenny wanted to say. I have to stand by my beliefs and principles, but that shouldn't keep us apart. And most of all, she wanted to reach out, take his hand, and tell him, I care about you, Jake. I'm crazy about you!

Tears stung Jenny's eyes as it came time for her

to sing a verse. She took a deep breath and belted out the words, soulfully, lovingly . . . holding back just a little. She couldn't just open up and let all her wild emotions come spilling out in this song. It was one thing to let Jake know how she felt, but she couldn't break down and cry in front of the rest of the band.

She opened her eyes as she sang:

*"If you only knew what was in my heart,
we wouldn't spend a single minute more apart.
If you only knew what was in my soul,
you would know that I need you to make me whole."*

Jake's face remained cool and expressionless, like a stone statue in the park. But his eyes gave him away.

He was hurting as much as Jenny was.
Could they make this thing work?

Jenny and Matt let their voices blend in harmony to finish the song. "I'd be back loving you . . . if you only knew."

In the silence that followed, Jenny took a deep breath, trying to swallow back her emotions and regain her sense of balance.

"That song really works for us," Tiffani said.

"Blew my socks off!" Tony agreed. "I think we're ready to perform that number at our next gig."

"Which, by the way, will be sooner than any of

you expected!" Sly appeared in the doorway to the house, rubbing his hands together in glee. "Super Sly has scored—big time!"

"What now, Sly?" Jenny said suspiciously. "Let me guess. You've booked us at a mime convention."

"Wrong!" Sly said with a jaunty smile. "Though that's not a bad idea. But this gig is to die for. The one gig every band in town has been hoping for. Just the biggest event of the season. The beach blast to end all beach blasts. The—"

"The triathlon party?" the other teens shouted.

Sly gave them a thumbs-up sign. "You got it!"

Whoops and cheers filled the garage as the Dreams reacted to the news.

"How did you manage to land that baby?" Jake asked.

"It all started out with our gig at the Sunnyvale Retirement Home. . . ." Proudly, Sly straightened the lapels of his paisley vest.

"The gig you screwed up," Matt pointed out.

"Details, details," Sly said, waving him off. "I knew that gig for the old folks was a great idea."

"But you wanted to blow it off!" Tiffani objected.

Sly shrugged. "The point is, after we got those old folks' bearing aids buzzing, they became fast and furious fans of California Dreams."

"We know that part, Sylvester," Tony reminded him. "We were there."

Ignoring him, Sly continued, "It turns out that one of the Sunnyvale residents, Iris McDimple, called her daughter, Brenda Tartikoff, and told her how fantastic we were. Mrs. Tartikoff just happens to be the elusive lady in charge of bookings for the triathlon party."

"And Mrs. Tartikoff called here," Tiffani said, trying to hurry Sly through the boring details.

"Exactly," Sly said. "She told me that for some reason the triathlon party gig was still open. She asked me if California Dreams was available tomorrow night, and—ha-hoorn! I booked us for the gig. Signed, sealed, and delivered. Another hang-up job by your man, Sly."

"The triathlon party will be great exposure for the band," Matt admitted. "But does the gig pay?"

"Just three hundred and fifty smackerels!" Sly answered.

"Are we talking U.S. dollars?" Matt blinked.

Tony beat the drums with a flourish as Jenny and Tiffani whooped in delight.

"You got us money for a gig?" Jake said in disbelief. "It's a novel concept, Winkle, but I like it. I like it a lot."

"There are two bands scheduled to play," Sly explained. "The Blue Notes will warm up the crowd starting at four o'clock. Then we're on at five. Top billing!"

"Way to go, Sylvester," Tony said, slapping Sly on the back.

California Dreams

Jenny folded her arms across her chest. "I hate to admit it, but I am impressed. You came through, Sly."

"It's a great gig," Tiffani agreed. "Let's just hope we're in good enough shape to play tomorrow evening. Don't forget: We've got to make it through the triathlon first."

"Don't remind me," Tony said, frowning. "After Grant's thugs get through with us, we might be the California Dead Heads."

"That's right!" Sly slapped his forehead. "And a dead band means a no-show. I've booked the gig of the century, and you guys might not even live to see it!"

"Don't even talk like that," Jake ordered. "When we get out there on the race course tomorrow, we're going to look out for each other. Think *any*. It's got to be our number one priority."

"I'm with Jake," Matt said. "We've got to stick together. Forget about who wins and who loses. The object is to catch Grant in his own trap."

"Deal?" Jake asked, his dark eyes probing straight through to Jenny's heart.

She stepped around to the front of the electric piano and shook Jake's hand. "You've got a deal."

"How about the rest of you?" asked Jake.

"Band huddle!" Matt called.

The other band members joined hands. Even Sly pushed his way into the pack.

The Dream Team

"California Dreams," Matt said. "One for all, and all for one!"

Jenny smiled. It sounded so much like the Three Musketeers going into battle, but she didn't mind.

The band was united again, and that was what really mattered.

Chapter 11

Saturday was a picture-perfect California day. Wispy white clouds rode high in the spectacular blue sky. The air was clear and dry. The sun was hot, but the salty breeze off the ocean blew in steadily, bringing cool relief.

"It's a great day for a race," Jenny said, resting her hand out the window of the car.

"Sure is." Matt turned their parents' station wagon into the parking lot of the high school, where the triathlon would begin. Bright banners and chalk marks in the grass marked the starting line at the edge of the school's baseball field. Even though there was still an hour until the start of the race, the school grounds were swarming with kids.

Members of the race committee handed out flyers showing a map of the race course and a list of the

rules. Families were gathered in small clusters, ready to cheer their favorite team over the starting line. The carts of food vendors were strewn along the school grounds, and the smells of hot dogs, french fries, and hot pretzels made Jenny's mouth water as she hopped out of the car.

"Mmm, I could use a pretzel," she told her brother.

"Not me," Matt said, stretching. "I already had breakfast with Mallory, brunch with Caitlin, and an early lunch with Randi Jo."

"And it's just noon!" Jenny shook her head. "Better take it easy. With a diet like that, you might jump into the water and sink straight to the bottom."

"It would be worth it," Matt said, sighing. "The dating ploy you girls pulled has actually been a lot of fun. But I'm kind of glad it's ending. I need to put some time into schoolwork and the band . . . and sleep."

Across the schoolyard, Jenny saw a few girls carrying signs for the Feminine Faction. Alexis Suarez was at the center of the group, along with Sarah Feinberg. Jen was glad they'd turned out to cheer the girls' team on, but she would also be relieved when the whole campaign ended. Who knew what kind of grade Ms. Canton was going to give them!

"How's that foot doing?" Matt asked as he pulled Jenny's bike off the car rack.

"Better," she answered, glad that she and her

brother were on good terms again. Reaching up, she helped him pull down his bicycle, which Jake would use in the race. They left a third bike—their mom's—on the rack. That would be a backup, in case Grant's team totaled one of the other bicycles.

Within the next few minutes, the other members of California Dreams arrived. Jake pulled up on his Harley. Tony and Tiffani had walked to school together. And Sly had bummed a ride from a group of girls who'd come to cheer on the Feminine Faction.

"See you at the triathlon party," Sly told them as he hopped out of the car and closed the door. "My band is going to be performing there."

He waved as the car full of girls drove off.

"Your band?" Jake repeated. "I didn't know we were indentured servants."

"It's just a figure of speech," Sly said. Eager to get started, he rubbed his hands together. "Are we ready to go?"

"Just about," Tiffani shielded her eyes from the sun as she gazed out over the school grounds. "Neena agreed to meet us here early. I called her last night to tip her off about Grant's plan."

"There she is—over by the ice-cream vendor," Tony said, pointing.

The Dreams waved, and Neena came jogging over. Her long, slender legs carried her along gracefully, like a leaping deer.

She is so fine! Tony longed to make his move

right at this very moment, but he knew he would be better off playing it cool. He had to finish his swimming lessons before he could even think of hustling the beach and showing Neena that he could be in tune with her world, the surf culture.

"Hey, Dreams!" Neena called. "Ready to rock and roll?"

"Definitely!" Tiffani gave a sunny smile as she motioned Neena into their huddle.

"Here's a map of the triathlon course," Neena said, spreading a flyer out on the grass so that everyone could see it. "The runners start here at the school. Our three-mile course takes us into the hills, up to that old restaurant, the Hungry Seagull."

Tony gulped. "There are a lot of hills on this route. I should have eaten an extra bowl of Wheaties this morning."

The teens nodded as they followed along on the map.

"That's where the bicycle segment begins," Jake said, turning to Matt and Jenny. "Did you bring the bikes?"

Matt nodded. "I've already loaded them into the triathlon committee's truck. They're going to drive all the bikes up to the Hungry Seagull."

"They'll be shuttling the bikers there in vans," Jenny explained. "And they'll drop all the swimmers off at the club so that everyone is waiting at their respective starting points."

"Just remember that Grant is out to get us," Jake warned. "So be on guard. I brought a portable air pump in case his goons let the air out of our tires."

"I brought a first-aid kit," Jenny said, patting the mini-pouch strapped to her waist.

Tiffani passed out small plastic packets filled with nuts and raisins. "I brought granola to keep our strength up."

"I didn't know we were supposed to bring things," Tony said, flashing them an embarrassed smile.

"Just do your best in the race," Tiffani told him.

"Sly will be in the car with a backup bike—and all the band equipment for our gig," Matt explained, handing Sly the car keys.

"Take it slow," Jenny warned him. "Dad almost had a cow this morning when he heard that you'd be driving the family car."

"Not to worry," Sly insisted, snatching the car keys. "The Garrison-mobile will be in my most capable hands."

"Just keep your eyes on the road and off the girls," Matt warned.

"No problemo," Sly answered. "No one is allowed to drive on the triathlon route, but I'll catch up at intersecting roads to check on you kids."

"That's the plan," Jake said. "Any questions?"

"Just one," Sly said petulantly. "Whose brilliant idea was this stupid race, anyway?"

When the Dreams turned to him with annoyed expressions, he had the good grace to back down. "Just kidding!" Sly insisted, his face turning pink. "It's for a great cause. Let's get out there and show the world who we are!"

"At this time, all triathlon contestants should be in their groups!" the voice buzzed over the public address system.

At the edge of the pack of runners, Tony dropped to a squat and did a few leg stretches. He felt revved up and ready to go, and he was glad that Neena was in this part of the competition, too. Across the schoolyard, the other Dreams waited in groups that would pile into the triathlon vans after the race had started. Tiffani and Matt stood together in the pack of swimmers, and Jake and Jenny waited along with the other bikers.

"Did you get your team's bracelet?" Neena asked, holding out her arm to reveal the plastic band around her wrist.

"Got it." Tony tugged the Velcro fastener to adjust his bracelet as he smiled at Neena. "Now, remember," he reminded her. "Mike Giordano is on Grant's team, so watch out for him."

"I plan to stay one step ahead of him—literally," Neena said as she propped her foot on a bench and leaned forward to stretch.

"At this time, all runners should take their places behind the starting line," came the next announcement.

"Good luck," Tony told Neena as he gripped her wrist in a quick handshake.

"Let's stay ahead of the pack," she said, flashing him a smile with the power to melt him in place.

The schoolyard buzzed with excitement as everyone waited expectantly for the start of the race. Kids were calling out names and cheering their friends on. The P.A. system crackled. The air sizzled with energy.

"Runners, take your marks!" the announcer shouted.

A cheer rose from a group of girls pressing in at the tape on the sidelines. "N-E-E-N-A! Neena all the way!"

Tony moved into starting position, his muscles tense and ready to spring to action.

"On your marks," the voice boomed out. "Get set . . . *pow!*"

The starting pistol blasted into the air, and Tony lunged forward, running hard and fast. He wanted to get to the front of the pack in the beginning of the race, before the hilly part of the course.

He had to dart and weave between the other

runners, but by the time they were two blocks away from school, the pack had thinned considerably. *I must be at the front*, Tony thought. His breath came out in measured spurts as he kept pumping his legs.

"Way to set the pace, Wicks!" Neena called from behind him.

In a few loping strides, she was beside him.

With a few more paces, she was in front of him.

But Tony didn't mind. His ego could deal with finishing behind Neena. Besides, the view from behind her was dynamite. Following Neena was well, it was downright inspirational.

They pulled in front of a few other runners until there was nothing ahead of them but a winding ribbon of black asphalt.

And Mike Giordano.

Careful, Neena! Tony wanted to call after her as she pulled ahead of him, gaining on Mike. But he didn't want her to think that he was holding her back. And he didn't want to tip off Mike that they'd heard about Grant's plan.

About a mile into the race, Tony was dragging a third place. He could see the other two runners ahead of him, with Neena following on Mike's heels. At one point, Mike veered off the road, and Neena followed his path exactly, kicking up dust behind her. They looped around a bunch of palm trees and then cut back onto the road.

What is Mike up to? Tony wondered. He

wouldn't dare take a shortcut with Neena so close on his tail. So why had he veered off the road?

Tony found out when he reached that stretch of road. He was in midstride when his legs suddenly caught on something and tangled behind him.

"Yeeow!" Tony cried as his body flew through the air. As if he were moving in agonizingly slow motion, he saw the pavement stretch on endlessly . . . then loom up toward his face.

He was taking a nosedive onto the asphalt!

Chapter 12

Aargh!" Tony grunted as his palms and elbows scraped against the roadway. Pain stung him. He landed on his stomach and skidded to a halt.

"What the heck was . . .?" Ignoring the pain, he pushed himself up and looked behind him. He had to focus hard to see it, but suddenly it was crystal clear. A thin, nylon rope had been strung across the road, its ends tied off on palm trees.

"That's what tripped me," he muttered, trying to loosen the knot at one end.

And that had been the reason why Mike Giordano had veered off the road. He had known exactly where the trap would be set up. Neena had been smart to follow his path.

But what about the other runners? Tony worked at the knotted rope, but it wouldn't budge.

"Hey, Wicks! Quit moping around and get a move on!"

Tony looked around and found the source of the voice. Sly was perched on the bluffs just above him.

"I stumbled onto step one of Grant's plan," Tony said, pointing to the rope. Quickly, he explained it all to Sly.

"If you're okay, keep going!" Sly ordered.

But Tony shook his head. "I can't leave this rope here. Someone could be seriously hurt!"

"Hang on!" Sly called down.

As Sly disappeared behind the bluffs, Tony checked his wounds. His hands and elbows were scraped and dirty, and from the pink flesh that showed through, he could tell that his skin was really going to smart when it met soap and water.

At that moment, two runners appeared on the horizon, and Tony motioned them off the roadway. "Go around the palm trees!" he shouted. "There's a rope hanging here—a trap!"

They seemed confused at first but then followed his advice.

"Thanks, man!" one guy called back, and then picked up his pace again.

Just then, Sly appeared with a pair of scissors. "Found these in the car with the electrical tape," he explained quickly. Sometimes the band needed the scissors and duct tape to rig their wiring for a gag.

Tony waited until Sly had cut through the nylon rope, then started jogging down the road.

"Thanks, Sylvester," he called back. "Your mother would be proud of you."

"Just step on it!" Sly shouted as he dragged the useless rope off the road. "You've got to make up for lost time."

Even more importantly, Tony thought as he picked up the pace, *I've got to catch up with Neena the Queen!*

Almost over! Huffing and puffing, Tony loped up the hill. He looked at the line of bikers in the parking lot of the Hungry Seagull, their helmets gleaming in the sun. Dressed in bike shorts, tank tops and helmets, they resembled a brigade of the Swiss army. Which one was Jake?

"Come on, Wicks!" Jake called. He was straddling his bike, ready to push off.

With a last burst of energy he didn't know he had, Tony pumped his legs, sprinting into the restaurant parking lot.

"The bracelet!" Jake shouted. "Get ready to pass off the bracelet."

"Oh, yeah." Tony ripped the bracelet off his wrist and pressed it into Jake's hand with a warning. "Grant's team set up a trap. Rope across the road. Careful, man."

Gravel and dust sprayed the air as Jake peeled out of the parking lot and turned onto the roadway. As he disappeared down the hill, Tony sank onto the

ground and rested his head between his legs. Some race. He felt weary to the bone . . . until he glanced up at the restaurant entrance and spotted Neena. Sitting on the cement steps, sipping a cup of Gatorade, she was a sight for sore eyes.

Suddenly, Tony felt his energy returning.

Meanwhile, Jake was pedaling hard as the wind whipped past his ears. He had to catch up with Jenny. He couldn't stand the thought of her riding on the open road with that creep Grant White on the loose. Especially after what Tony had told him.

It took him a few minutes, but at last he spotted her on a stretch ahead. Jenny was riding in Grant's tailwind, just a few yards behind him. If she didn't watch it, that jerk would run her right off the road.

Jake pumped the pedals, leaning out as he steered around a hairpin turn, and then soared ahead. He caught up with Jenny, who held her head low, her helmet strapped securely under her chin, as smooth and delicate as a china doll's. For the hundredth time, Jake wished that Jenny wasn't in such a vulnerable situation.

"You okay?" Jake called.

She nodded. "Fine. I'm hanging back until we get out of the hills and onto the flat stretch."

"Good strategy."

As they rode side by side, Jake puzzled over the cyclist in front of them. Why hadn't Grant's team gone through with its plan to flatten the bike tires? When the bicycles had been unloaded in front of the

Hungry Seagull, Jake and Jenny had been surprised to see all the tires fully inflated. Maybe Grant had something else up his sleeve.

"I'm going to go check out the competition,"

Jake said.

"Take it easy," Jenny warned as Jake changed gears and pulled ahead.

As Jake caught up to Grant, anger began to churn inside him. It was one thing to want to win. But another thing to sabotage the race for everyone else. There were two dozen cyclists back at the Hungry Seagull waiting to run their leg of the race. Waiting to run it fair and square.

Nothing burned Jake more than a cheater.

He moved up on Grant's left side and looked over. "You're the leader of the pack, White. Was it worth it? Was it worth trying to trip half the runners in the first event?"

Wordlessly, Grant glared at Jake.

Then he reached down to the crossbar and plucked off a long piece of metal tubing.

What . . . ? Jake wondered why Grant had taped the spare metal rod to the crossbar of his bike.

He didn't have to wonder long.

Grant leaned over and shoved the metal bar into the spokes of Jake's front wheel.

Before Jake could respond, the wheel seized—and he was flying over the handlebars, somersaulting through the air.

Chapter 13

Jake!" Jenny screamed, horrified at the incident that had unfolded before her eyes.

She pulled hard on her brakes and skidded to a stop just a few feet away from where Jake lay crumpled in the grass at the side of the road.

Meanwhile, Grant turned back for a quick look and then sped off without a word. What a loser! Jenny thought. He was cruel, nasty . . . inhuman! And to think that she'd even gone out with him for a while!

"Jake, are you all right?" she asked, kneeling beside him. "Should I ride ahead and get help? That was an awful fall."

"I'm okay." He rolled onto his side and groaned. "Aw, man. That took me by surprise." Adrenaline was still pumping through his

veins, but the excitement was beginning to give way to a dull ache in his shoulders. It wasn't every day that he went flying off a bike.

"Good thing I was wearing this helmet," he said.

"Do you think you can walk?"

"Walking is the easy part." He stood up and brushed the grass off his black bicycle shorts. "I want to finish this race. Let's see if that bike will cooperate."

The mountain bike that Jake was riding was sprawled across the center of the road. Its front wheel was still spinning lazily until Jake grabbed the handlebars and set it back on the road.

"Looks okay," he said, stepping on and testing the brakes.

"These things are built to be rugged," Jenny said, gently touching Jake's shoulder. "But people aren't meant to go careening through the air like that. You sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine, Jenny." *Some hero*, Jake thought, frowning. *I rode ahead to save Jenny and ended up flat on the roadside.*

Jenny went back to her own bike and hopped on. She had a feeling that the other cyclists weren't far behind them, but she was beginning to care less and less about winning the race.

"I can't believe Grant would stoop so low," Jenny said as she and Jake coasted down the hill. "You could have been seriously hurt."

California Dreams

"Grant White is a loser," Jake said. "But I'll take the wind out of his sails."

At the moment, Jenny wanted nothing more than to see Grant get what he deserved. But she didn't want to see anyone else get hurt. "What are you planning to do to him?" she asked.

Jake's jawline looked grim as he leaned over the handlebars and focused on the road ahead. "What's the worst possible thing that could happen to a guy like Grant?"

"Let's see . . . His dad could take away his keys to the Corvette. Or maybe he could lose his membership in the country club."

"Okay," Jake nodded sagely. "We'll just have to make it happen."

Jenny laughed. "You're kidding, right?"

But Jake wasn't laughing. "I'm serious. Dead serious."

Down on the beach at the Sunnyvale Country Club, Tiffani paced nervously among the other swimmers who were waiting for the bikers of their relay teams. Tiffani turned toward the surf, where the sunlight glinted off the water. A half mile out, the country club's raft was floating. The triathlon racers had to swim out, tag the raft, and then return to the shore and drop their bracelets in the judge's bucket.

It was a piece of cake. Easy as pie. Tiffani was

The Dream Team

ready to go . . . just as soon as Jenny arrived with the bracelet.

Matt was stretched out in a nearby lounge chair, resting up for his portion of the race. Eric Parker, the swimmer on Grant's team, had his eyes peeled on the road. The other swimmers shuffled about, laughing and dancing to the canned music from the country club's sound system.

The crowd from the school had reassembled here to cheer the teams on through the final leg of the race. And the runners from the first part of the race had been dropped off by vans. Tony and Neena stood along the sidelines, calling out encouragement. At one point, Tiffani had spotted Sly in the crowd, flirting with a bunch of girls. Typical Sly!

Banners for the Feminine Faction bobbed in the crowd. The atmosphere was festive, and Tiffani was eager to let loose and party . . . just as soon as she'd swum her part of the race.

"Here comes a biker!" someone shouted.

The PA system crackled as a triathlon committee member announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, our first biker has arrived!"

The group of swimmers sprang forward, each hoping to see his or her teammate coming down the road.

Tiffani frowned when she spotted Grant White. His hands were raised above his head in victory as he cruised down the road. He ditched his bike along

the roadside and darted onto the beach to pass the bracelet to Eric.

"Go! Go! Go!" the crowd shouted
Jenny, where are you? Tiffani fixed her eyes on the road, willing her friend to appear. Come on! Come on!

A minute later, she blinked in wonder. Her telepathic message had worked!

Jenny came pedaling up the road beside Jake. A few yards behind them, other cyclists were gaining fast, but Tiffani didn't care. Jenny was here!

"Way to go, Jen!" Tiffani shouted, holding out her hand as Jenny jumped off her bike and raced across the sand with the bracelet. Quickly, Tiffani strapped on the bracelet and bounded into the surf. But Eric Parker was already approaching the raft. She'd never catch up!

In the distance, a group of girls chanted: "Fem-i-nine Fac-tion! Fem-i-nine Fac-tion!" But Tiffani couldn't hear them once she started swimming.

A few steps behind Tif, Matt fumbled with the Velcro fastenings of the bracelet and then jogged into the ocean. Tired and groggy, he was moving quite slowly.

I just have to swim to the raft and back, Matt thought. Just do it; then you can sleep. Bracing himself, he plunged into the cold water.

Jake slipped his arm over Jenny's shoulders as

they watched their teammates enter the water. "Thanks for picking me up back there," he told her, his lips close to her ear.

"Don't be silly," she said. "I couldn't leave you in pain on the ground."

"Not even to give the Feminine Faction a lead in the race?"

"Not for that. Not for anything," Jenny answered. "I'm liberated, not ruthless. Speaking of ruthless, what are we going to do about Grant?"

Jake nodded toward the country club terrace, where the triathlon committee had set up a table as their center of operations. "I think it's time we exposed his treachery. Let's report him to the committee."

Jenny slipped her hand into Jake's as they walked toward the club. "That'll really burn him," she said.

Jake smiled and squeezed her hand. "That's my intention."

From his spot on the beach, Tony stared into the gently breaking waves. He'd been cheering Matt on . . . until he'd lost track of Matt altogether.

Where was he?

The swimmer from Grant's team was already making his trip back to the beach. Tiffani was just tagging the raft, and Matt should have been close

behind her. But his dark head had bobbed under a wave, and with all the other swimmers in the water now, Tony couldn't find his friend.

He took a few steps into the water and cupped his hands over his mouth. "Matt!"

But none of the swimmers took notice. Tony's nerves shot through the sky when he spotted Matt at the edge of the race course, floundering in the surf. He was struggling to keep his head above water as he clung to the floats that marked off the swimming area.

There's no doubt about it, Tony thought as Matt was tossed back by a wave. Matt's in trouble.

Chapter 14

Sand flew out from under Tony's feet as he raced over to the lifeguard stand. "My friend needs help," he shouted up at the dude with white cream on his nose and reflective shades covering his eyes.

"Huh?" Confused, the guy frowned down at Tony.

Losing patience, Tony yanked the lifeguard's bright orange float out of the sand. "Follow me!" he shouted, and then ran across the beach and into the surf.

Tony's pulse was pounding as he forged ahead, trying to remember everything that Tiffani had taught him. Breathe out underwater. Keep kicking. Stay focused.

When he got to within shouting distance of Matt, Tony paused, paddling vigorously to keep his

head above water. "Matt!" he yelled. "Grab ahold of this float!"

Holding on to the attached rope, Tony pushed the orange float toward Matt. Fortunately, the lifeguard was right with him.

"I got him," the guard said, taking the rope from Tony's hands and swimming closer to Matt. "Just hold on," he ordered. "I'll tow you in."

Slowly, the threesome moved toward shore. Tony was relieved when his feet hit the sandy bottom and he could walk the rest of the way. Matt slung his arms around the shoulders of Tony and the lifeguard, and they helped him onto the beach and eased him into a lounge chair.

A small crowd closed in around them, and everyone seemed to talk at once.

"Are you okay?"

"You're a hero, Tony!"

In the distance, the announcer's voice rumbled. "And the winners of our triathlon event are the Sunnyvale Suns! Mike Giordano, Grant White, and Eric Parker."

But it was all a blur in Tony's ears. The only thing that registered were the two words that Matt uttered with a strained cough.

"Thanks, man."

Twenty minutes later, the crowd had gathered around the stage set up on the club's outdoor deck

overlooking the water. It was time for the awards ceremony.

"I think we came in second," Tiffani whispered to Jenny.

Jenny shrugged. "Let's see what the judges have to say." She and Jake had reported Grant's antics to the committee. Now it was up to them.

In the center of the crowd, the Dreams huddled close to each other. Matt was still dragging a little but feeling much better. Jake's arm was slung casually over Jenny's shoulders. Neena stood beside Tony, her arm linked through his.

"Two teams in the race, and we still couldn't win," Sly said, shaking his head in despair.

"Sly, Tony and Jake got wiped out, and Matt nearly drowned," Jenny pointed out.

"I didn't see you plugging away in the race, Wimple," Jake said sternly.

"Give us a little credit, Sly. We gave it our best shot," Tiffani said proudly.

"But what a disaster!" Tony exclaimed. "Face it, Sylvester. The Dreams are not cut out for this he-man Neanderthal stuff. From now on, I'm sticking to band competitions."

"Yeah," Matt agreed. "A battle of the bands is a lot more fun—and a heck of a lot safer."

Neena squeezed Tony's arm and flashed him a killer smile. "Don't underestimate yourself," she said quietly. "You ran that race like a pro. Not to

mention jumping into the water to save Matt. That was really heroic, Tony. Especially considering that you just learned to swim."

Tony's mouth dropped open. "You knew that I couldn't swim?"

"Of course. That's why I was sure it would never work out between us. I mean, a surfer chick and a landlubber?" She rolled her eyes, as if the notion was unimaginable. "But I underestimated you, Tony. You showed me that people have hidden abilities."

"I did?" His heart began to pound as he gazed down into her beautiful brown eyes. Just when he'd been about to give up, he'd landed the girl of his dreams. Go figure!

"You're a sweetheart, Tony." Neena leaned up and placed a gentle kiss on his cheek. For a moment, Tony thought he was hearing fireworks. Then he realized it was just applause.

The audience was clapping for Mrs. Tartikoff, who had just stepped up to the microphone onstage. "Sorry for the delay, folks," she said. "But we've had to rescore the competition, due to some cheating by one of our triathlon teams."

A curious murmur rippled through the crowd.

Mrs. Tartikoff waited for things to die down and then continued, "The Sunnyvale Suns have been disqualified. That means our first-place team—and new triathlon champion—is the Feminine Faction!"

Shrieks and applause filled the air. Jenny, Tiffani, and Neena hugged each other and then bounded onto the stage to accept their medals. As Mrs. Tartikoff lifted the ribboned medallions over their heads, the applause died down to a chant from the girls in the crowd.

"Fem-i-nine Fac-tion! Fem-i-nine Fac-tion!"

Neena took the mike and simply said, "We'd like to thank all the girls of Pacific Coast High for their support."

Another cheer rose as Jenny lifted her medal to the audience, and Tiffani blew them kisses. Then the three girls waved to the crowd and clambered off the stage.

"The triathlon committee would like to thank every team that helped us raise money for our worthy charity," Mrs. Tartikoff's voice droned on. "As far as we're concerned, you're all winners! And don't forget this afternoon's party, featuring the Blue Notes and California Dreams. . . ."

It's over! Jenny thought with a sigh of relief.

The girls were surrounded by the other band members, who swarmed around them with hugs and pats on the back.

"Way to go!" Matt said.

Jake lifted Jenny in a huge bear hug and swept her around in a circle. "Congratulations!" he told her.

"The new champ, Ms. Neena Holmes!" Tony

California Dreams

raised Neena's fist in the air, stirring up more applause.

"This is great!" Sly exclaimed. "I knew this triathlon was a fabulous idea. I just knew it. Wait till next year. We'll form three teams and—"

Jenny and Tiffani exchanged a look, just as Neena spun around and glared at Sly.

"Come on, girls," Jenny said firmly.

Without another word, the three girls rushed forward and swept Sly off his feet, lifting him in the air.

"Hey, what's this?" he asked. "Oh, I get it. Just like those ballplayers lift the coach into the air after a win, right?"

But that wasn't what the girls had in mind.

"Excuse us," Tiffani told two older women, who moved out of their path so that the girls could carry Sly to the edge of the wooden dock. When they reached the railing, they hoisted him higher—then let him go.

"Hey . . ." Sly's voice faded as he dropped down and hit the water with a loud splash.

"That takes care of next year's race," Jenny said, pushing away from the railing.

Matt, Tony, and Jake were all smiles.

"From now on, let's hope Sly sticks to music bookings," Jake said.

Matt peered over the edge and watched as Sly swam to the beach and emerged from the water. "I have a feeling that Sly got the message—finally."

The Dream Team

"Well," Tiffani said, gazing down at her medal, "I'm hungry after all that swimming. Anybody else up for a snack? Remember, we've got a gig to do in another hour or so."

"I'm famished," Neena agreed.

"Let me escort you lovely ladies to a round of big, beefy burgers," Tony said, extending his arm with a flourish.

"Hungry?" Jake asked Jenny.

"Not really." A breeze blew off the water, lifting her bangs. "Let's just hang out here. It looks like the Blue Notes are going to start playing soon." The stage had been taken over by a bunch of guys who were frantically setting up equipment and testing mikes.

Jake bought two lemonades from the bar, and he and Jenny found an empty spot at the end of the pier.

Nearby, Matt was still leaning against the rail, looking out over the ocean, when someone touched his arm. He turned around and saw the smiling face of Randi Jo.

"Hi, Matt." Her blond ponytail bobbed in the wind. "Are you okay? I was so worried when I saw them dragging you out of the water."

"I'm fine." He folded his arms across his chest. "Nothing a little sleep won't fix."

"About the dating thing . . .," she began hesitantly.

"Operation: Date-Till-You-Drop?"

Randi Jo frowned. "Oh, Matt. It was a dirty trick. And it was my idea, which made it that much worse when it unfolded and I couldn't stop it. The truth is, it drove me nuts to see you going out with all those other girls."

"Oh, really?" Matt kept his cool. "How do you think I felt being used? I thought all those girls liked me . . . but it turned out that I was just another handsome face."

"Not to me," Randi Jo insisted, blinking in that cute way that made her eyelashes flutter.

She may have a devious mind, Matt thought, but there's something about her that's endearing.

"You're very special to me, Matt," Randi Jo said soulfully. "Can you ever forgive me for what I did?"

Matt rested his hands on her tiny shoulders and smiled. "You know I can't hold a grudge."

"Oh, Matt . . ." She flung herself into his arms, nearly knocking him over. "I'm so glad. You're so cute. We're so good together. Does that mean we're an item again? How about a picnic tomorrow afternoon? And the movies tonight after the party? There's a new film opening at the—"

"Whoa," Matt said as they headed inside the club. "Before we plan anything, I'm going to sleep for a hundred years. . . ."

Jenny watched her brother and Randi Jo disap-

pear inside the club's arched doorway. "I guess Matt has forgiven us for wearing him down," she told Jake. "What about you and me? Are we square now?"

"Well . . ." Jake looked away. "There is that little matter of the other night. I was accused of thinking you were, and I quote, 'a wimp . . . a wuss . . . a total pansy.'"

"And wasn't that what you were thinking?" Jenny asked pointedly.

"I . . . no, not really. Sure, I wasn't crazy about the idea of you being in the race. But not because I don't have confidence in you. Because I didn't want to see you hurt. The same way you didn't like the way Grant did a number on me in the bike race."

"That was awful," Jenny admitted, squeezing Jake's arm. "And I'm sure glad my foot didn't hurt as much as I thought it would."

Now that all the commotion was over, those old, awkward feelings had come rushing back. Her palms were sweating. Her heart was beating like an alarm clock. It was Jake. Being close to him always caused these heart-wrenching feelings. Wow, why did she care for him so much?

"Through this whole triathlon thing, I hope you've come to realize that I'm not a male chauvinist pig," Jake told her, his dark eyes burning with conviction. "And I hope you've learned that I care about you, Jen. I care a lot."

Tha-thump! Tha-thump! Jenny's heart was

pounding so hard, she was sure that everyone inside the club could hear it. She had to calm down!

"I've learned a lot of things this week," Jenny said, trying to slow her heartbeat by concentrating on the white-capped waves. "I've learned that real strength is something you possess deep inside. I've learned that liberation is more than just lifting heavy amps and opening doors. When we worked together in the race today—all of us—that was real equality."

"As Matt said, all for one and one for all," Jake said. "So . . . if I let the wimp-wuss-pansy thing drop, I guess we're square."

"Except for one thing," Jenny added, pressing her nose against his cheek. "Something bigger than the both of us."

"Don't fight it, Jen." Jake pulled her closer and locked his arms behind her back, surrounding Jenny with a wonderful feeling of warmth. "Sometimes you just have to stop fighting and let the wind take you where it will. It's scary, but it can be a great ride."

"Promise?" she asked.

The answer was in his smoldering eyes.

Finally, Jenny stopped worrying about her pounding heart and sweating palms. Closing her eyes, she leaned forward to kiss Jake. At last, she could let the wind carry her off—far, far away—to a place where she and Jake could explore the sweetest harmonies ever sung by two hearts.

The Dream Team




Pacific Coast High's triathlon is coming up, and it's the biggest social event of the summer. Sly wants the Dreams to race for publicity reasons . . . but when he suggests that Jenny and

Tiffani just stand on the sidelines in bikinis, watch out!

Determined to win the triathlon themselves, the girls begin Operation Date-Til-You-Drop to tire the guys out before the big race. But things really heat up when Jake, the ultimate hunk, finally admits he's crazy about Jenny.

Will the girls win the triathlon after all? Is Jake too hot for Jenny to handle? Find out when you read *The Dream Team*, the new novel about California Dreams—the hottest band around!

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